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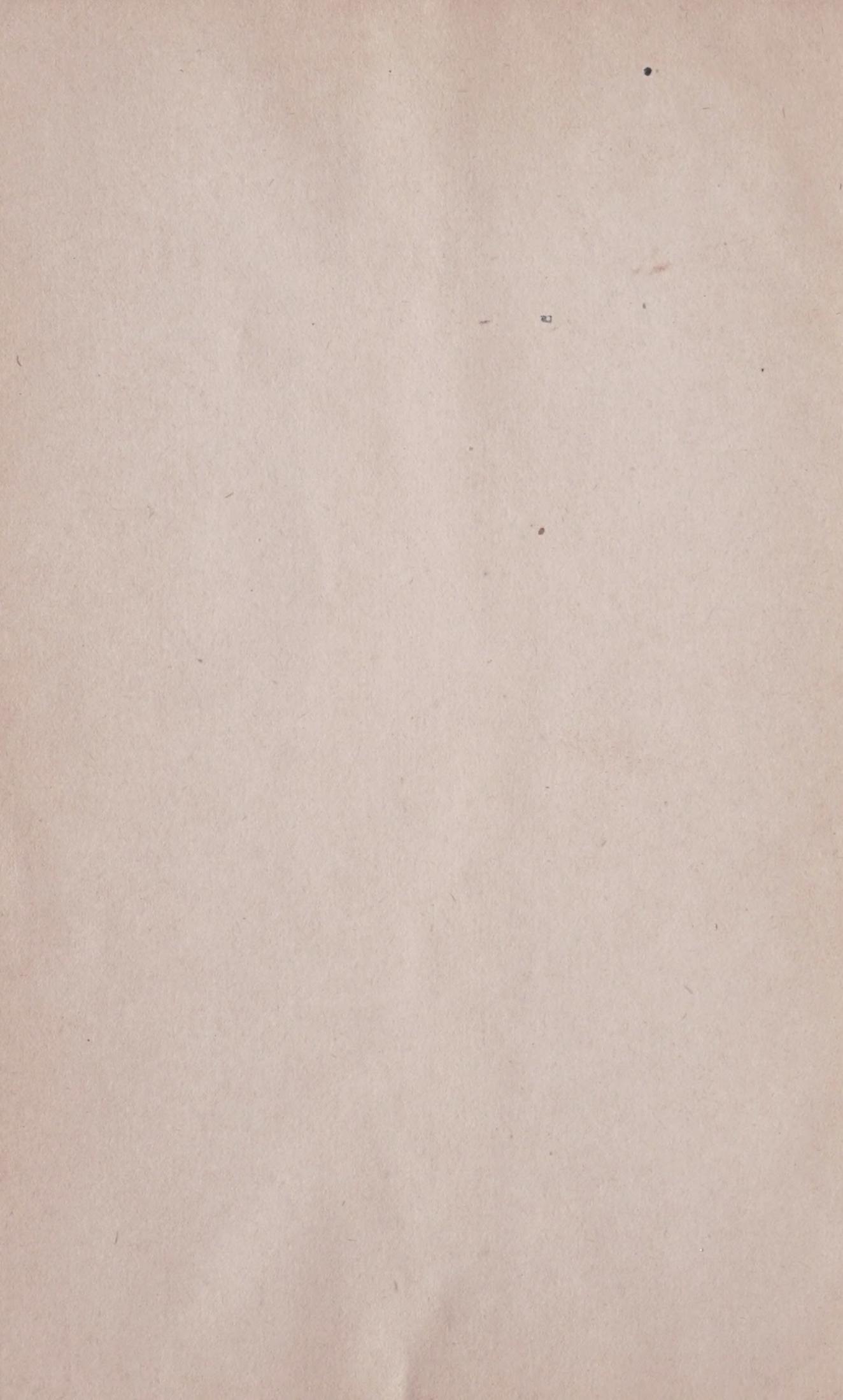
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UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.







GLOBE

DETECTIVE SERIES.

THE STOLEN LETTER



BY

CHARLES MORRIS.

CHICAGO:
RAND, MCNALLY & CO.,
PUBLISHERS





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THE STOLEN LETTER;

OR,

Frank Sharp, the Washington Detective.

BY

CHARLES MORRIS,

AUTHOR OF "THE DETECTIVE'S CRIME," ETC., ETC.



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THE STOLEN LETTER;

OR,

FRANK SHARP, THE WASHINGTON DETECTIVE.

CHAPTER I.

THE TRICK OF AN OLD FOX.

WE find ourselves in the interior of a small, but richly furnished and remarkably beautiful apartment, in a stately mansion of the city of Washington.

The windows are adorned with curtains of priceless lace, drawn over crimson drapery. The costliest product of Persian looms covers the floor. The furniture is of the most artistic finish and the rarest woods. Delicate perfumes permeate the atmosphere. Boundless wealth and the highest taste seem combined to render that room a gem of beauty and splendor.

Yet, in its midst stands a woman whose beauty throws into shadow that of her rich surroundings.

Tall, stately, with a form that surpassed the rarest work of Greek sculpture, and a face whose charm no painter could hope to put on canvas, she was attired in the richest lace and velvet, while jewels worth a queen's ransom sparkled on snowy throat and taper fingers, and in the wavy wealth of rich brown hair.

Despite her stately dignity she was young. Age had not yet laid its fingers on the satiny smoothness of that clear skin, nor pressed more than the most charming dimple into the softness of her peach-hued cheek.

Yet, rich, young, beautiful, and regally dressed as the lady appeared, she was evidently ill at ease and ruffled in temper.

There was an open letter in her hand, half crushed between the delicate fingers, while her eyes sparkled with anger, and she bit her lip until the blood seemed ready to stain the ivory luster of her teeth.

"How *dare* he write me this?" she exclaimed, tapping the floor with her foot in vexed impatience. "I have not given him an atom of encouragement. Yet the reckless boy dares—dares—to send *me* an avowal of love."

She ran her burning eye again over the written sheet.

"And hints that I have led him on to this

madness! That I have made advances! Good heavens, if General Gordon should see this I would be ruined! It would fearfully compromise me. And he would shoot that wild fool of a boy.

"It must be destroyed at once--instantly!" she resumed. "He will be here in a moment to take me to the opera. If he should find *this* in my hands—"

She looked hastily and anxiously around her. How should she destroy it so that no tell-tale fragment might rise in evidence against her?

There was no means of burning it. If torn to pieces there was no safe place of concealment. Her eyes gleamed with concern, dread and vexation.

"There is but one means," she cried, desperately. "The grate fire in the library! I may have time to reach it and return before my husband comes."

She took a hasty step towards the door. Then she stopped and drew back convulsively, while a look of despair came into her expressive features.

"It is too late! He is here!"

A footstep had sounded in the hall without. A hand was already upon the door.

It was too late! Too late to conceal the

dangerous letter! Too late to even thrust it into her pocket!

With a quick movement she laid it upon the table, with the written side downward, and only the address visible, and with a hasty step glided across the room.

When the door opened she was bending over a bouquet of delicate flowers, that lay upon an ivory stand at the side of the room, her willowy figure curving in an attitude of grace that would have made the fortune of a sculptor.

The person who had entered was a sedate and somewhat portly gentleman, with a proud and handsome face, and an air as if in his veins ran the blood of a hundred generations of noblemen.

He was attired in a neatly-fitting dress suit.

"Come, Lucile, are you ready?" he remarked in a quiet tone.

"Ready and waiting, George," she replied, turning quickly, with a flush on her ivory cheek but no other sign of her recent excitement.
"Let us start at once. We shall be late."

She moved quickly towards him, carrying the bouquet, with a concealed desire to hasten him from the room, and from the vicinity of that perilous paper.

"There is plenty of time," he replied with a

laugh. "You have not looked at the clock, I fancy. Wait, there is a matter of which I wish to speak to you before we go."

"If there is time," she said, hesitatingly.

"Have I not said there is time? You are not usually in such haste. Let me have a scrap of paper, Lucile. Or, no matter, this will do."

He stretched his hand towards the fatal letter.

It was a moment of deadly peril. Only the highest courage and quickest wit could have saved the imperiled woman from ruin.

An instant shudder ran through her frame, as if she had felt an electric shock. Yet it was the spasm of a second. The next moment she was erect and calm, while a smile lay on her speaking face.

"You shall not scribble upon my letters," she declared with a nervous laugh, as she laid her hand on the epistle. "That is just like you. You have no sentiment. Here is paper. I wonder what Jenny Maitland would say if I told her that you used her letters to figure up the price of cabbage."

"That would just suit Jenny. She likes cabbage," he lightly replied, as he took the scrap of paper she offered him. "But I will spare her missive for the present, I sup-

pose it is scribbled full of loves and doves and that sort of thing. Come over here where there is more light."

These last remarks had been heard by other ears than those for whom they were intended.

Just outside the open door stood a third personage, a slender-framed but wiry-looking individual, with a rather thin face, and small, sharp eyes.

He was dressed as well as General Gordon himself, and seemed a personage of importance. Yet there was a foxy expression upon his face as he listened, a look of unprincipled cunning that bespoke a man into whose clutches it was not safe to fall.

He stepped forward just as husband and wife reached the window, and announced his presence by a slight cough.

General Gordon turned quickly toward the visitor.

"Oh, it is you, Mr. Martindale! Can you excuse me for two minutes?"

"Ten, if you wish, Mr. Secretary. My time, just now, is not precious."

"Take a seat, pray."

Mrs. Gordon's face was a study at the moment in which her eyes fell upon the visitor,

There was a slight start, a look of momentary terror, then a quick drawing up of her tall form, and a concealed defiance in her ceremonious bow.

Mr. Martindale returned it with easy dignity. He took a seat near the table, his narrow eyes roving round the room in the manner of a detective.

They fell on the letter that lay on the table. A slight movement followed, though the expression of his face remained without change.

General and Mrs. Gordon were now conversing in low tones in the alcoved window, the lady facing the visitor, while the back of her husband was towards him.

Mr. Martindale drew his chair nearer the table, while his shrewd eyes furtively scanned the address of the letter. Despite her self-possession Mrs. Gordon's foot tapped the floor nervously.

"Jenny Maitland!" muttered the visitor. "That is no lady's hand. And I fancy I have seen it before. Ha! Lucile Gordon, you are playing a double game! I would give my soul to have you in my power. Is the chance now within my reach?"

The lady's eyes were on him and seemed reading every movement of his crafty soul,

Yet she dared not speak, dared not look her thoughts. She was in a position of cruel embarrassment.

The next moment Mr. Martindale drew a letter from his pocket, opened it, and seemed intent upon its perusal. General Gordon looked around.

"In a moment, Martindale. I see you are not losing time."

"I am at your service, General."

The secretary turned back.

"What is the matter, Lucile? You are shuddering."

At that instant Mr. Martindale had cast upon her a look of insolent triumph.

"A breath of cold air struck me. I think that window must be slightly open."

"Step away from it, then. But it is near opera time. We must finish this matter to-morrow. Have you anything for me from the department, Martindale?"

He had turned and walked towards the center of the room as he spoke.

"Yes," said the visitor, rising and letting his letter fall with seeming carelessness beside that which lay on the table.

"There is a document here which needs your approval and signature,"

He handed a large official paper to the cabinet officer.

"I will attend to it to-morrow. Are you for the opera, Martindale?"

"Not to-night, by bad luck. There is a meeting of a senate committee at which I must play martyr."

He moved to pick up his fallen letter. But it was the wrong document on which his hand fell. It was that of Mrs. Gordon which he carelessly folded and thrust into his pocket, with a look of easy preoccupation.

This time the teeth of the lady closed on her lip till the blood actually started. Her breast heaved as if her heart would break through in a spasm. Her eyes fixed themselves on her enemy with a threatening glance.

But he met her gaze with a faint, mocking smile, of deep malignity.

All this by-play was lost on General Gordon, who was engaged in laying aside the document he had received.

"Can you not drop the committee meeting, Martindale? I can offer you a seat in my box."

"Many thanks, General. But it is impossible. I would give much for the pleasure of your society during the evening, and that of Mrs. Gordon

—” he bowed in deep deference to the lady—“ if it were not for that sour old axiom of ‘duty before pleasure.’ ”

“ I am sorry. But we must go. Is there anything more? ”

“ No. I must be going also. I have, fortunately, a little bit of pleasure in prospect.”

His eyes were fixed on Mrs. Gordon with an enigmatical look. But she had recovered her composure. As she passed she whispered in his ear, in a low but intense tone.

“ The truce is at an end, then? War is declared? ”

“ Yes.”

“ So be it. I am ready.”

She swept away behind her husband with the air of a duchess.

Martindale’s eyes followed her with admiration. There was a proud courage in that beautiful woman that forced admiration from his crafty soul.

He followed, the smile of cunning triumph again curling his lips.

In a few minutes more two carriages had rolled away from the house.

One was the handsome equipage of the cabinet officer in which General and Mrs. Gordon rode to the opera:—a play which the lady was

not likely to enjoy. She had a private drama, mayhap a tragedy, to occupy her mind.

The other was the less showy carriage of the diplomatic visitor.

He lay back with an air of deep satisfaction on the soft cushions of the swift-moving vehicle, with his hand on the breast pocket in which the stolen letter lay.

"It is a glorious night's work," he said triumphantly. "I fancy I have the proud Mrs. Gordon under my thumb. If so, my fortune is made. I burn to get home where I can read this precious treasure in safety. It is young Lindsay's writing, or I never saw it. Aha! my haughty beauty, you are at my feet now!"

Four hours after that moment General Gordon and his lady again entered their magnificent mansion. The secretary was as erect and dignified as ever. His wife seemed weary and worn out, and hung heavily on his arm as they entered the boudoir.

"A stupid affair, that opera. You look tired, Lucile. I am glad to be home myself. So this is from Jenny Maitland, eh? What has she to say?"

He picked up the letter that lay on the table.

"Why, this is not her writing! It is a man's

hand! Well, I declare if Martindale has not stupidly left his own letter and carried off yours. I hope there were no secrets in it you would not want that fox to read."

"Perhaps he did it purposely, George."

She rested her hand on a chair to sustain her trembling frame.

"Perhaps. He would do anything mean to pry into a secret. I will get the letter back for you to-morrow, Lucile."

"Oh, never mind it. It is of no importance," she replied, growing somewhat pale as she sank into a chair. "I declare I did not know I was so tired."

CHAPTER II.

A NIGHT AT THE CASINO.

EVERY phase of human life, from the lowest to the highest, from the most virtuous to the most dissolute, can be found within the mighty capital of the Union.

Little more than a step is needed to take us from the palace to the hovel. We can pass at will from the hall of splendor to the seat of crime or of unbounded dissipation.

From the scene of our last chapter, with its richness of decoration, its deceit and its trickery, we pass at once to a scene of little less splendor, yet which displays an entirely different phase of the mystery and misery of human life.

Bright lights gleam everywhere. The sparkle of silver and the luster of ivory add brilliance to the gay decorations of the extensive room.

The sound of excited talk, the ring of loud laughter, with the intense bitterness of an oc-

casional curse, or stifled cry of despair, come from the dense crowd that fills the room.

Mingled with it is a peculiar clattering sound, and the tones of low, dull, passionless voices, at the many tables around which the throng closely clusters.

It is, in fact, a great gambling center; one that is the haunt of official gamesters, and within whose walls gather the rich prodigals of the American Paris.

The games are now in full play, and money is being lost and won with phenomenal rapidity. There are women as well as men in the room, worshiping the blind god Fortune with fevered souls and faces.

But it is with two only of these persons we are particularly concerned.

One of them is a young man, of not more than twenty-two or three years of age, handsome and distinguished in appearance, and with a look of culture and intellect on his broad brow.

Yet just now a mingled despair and recklessness mark his flushed face. His eyes sparkle with the wild fever of the gambler. His hat is thrust back and his hair disheveled as he watches the machine-like movements of the "banker's" hands.

The person at his side is several years older, and of a steady, earnest expression. He is not one to be taken by the passion of gaming, yet seems just now full of concern at his friend's infatuation.

"Come, Harry," he whispered, "isn't it time for you to listen to reason? You have been steadily losing. If you go on you will be cleaned out completely."

"Cleaned out of what! Money? What care I for money?" demands the other in a reckless tone. "Do you suppose it is the rubbish of cash that is troubling me?"

"It might well be. You have lost five thousand dollars now."

"A fig for that! And a fig for life! I have something that would drive common men to the pistol or the rope. It has only driven me to the gaming-table."

"Ah!" replied the other, with concern. "What is that? I thought your life was as smooth as a rivulet. Can I not help you?"

"No, nothing and nobody can help me. As for the money I have another five thousand left, and here it goes on the red. If I lose, there is still the pistol or the rope."

His older friend tried to draw the reckless youth away from the fatal fascination of the table—but in vain.

He broke from his friendly grasp and dashed the last contents of his pocket on the red side of the *rouge-et-noir* table with an utter recklessness.

"Five thousand dollars on the red," he cried, in a tone that drew the attention of all to him.

He looked hot and fevered, yet it did not seem the fever of the gambler. His eyes were turned away from the money, with a far-away look of desperation, as if he despised the results of fortune.

"Red wins," came in the stolid tones of the banker.

"You are even now, Harry. Withdraw," whispered his friend.

"Make your bets, gentlemen," said the steady voiced banker.

"On the red, still," cried Harry.

Again the red won.

Despite the entreaties of his friend the young gamester let his money lie, again doubling his bet.

Yet fortune seemed to favor him now as much as it had before gone against him. Again and again, red came up the winning color.

Every eye was now directed on the reckless player, who seemed so utterly heedless of re-

sults, yet to whom fortune seemed to cling persistently.

Eighty thousand dollars lay before him, on the board, as a result of his doubling bets.

Yet he made no movement to take it up, and stood with the coolness of a statue, evidently paying but little attention to the run of the cards.

Yet his quiet friend was now quivering with excitement, and even the man of stone and iron that dealt the cards showed some signs of nervousness.

With a hand that slightly trembled he turned the next card.

A sudden drawing of the breath and a slight cry came from the observers.

Red had again appeared. With a thousand chances to one against him the reckless gamester had again won.

A buzz of whispering went around. With a recovery of his stolid manner the banker paid the bets he had lost, put away his "lay-out," and closed and locked the cash drawer of his table.

"There will be no more play to-night at this table, gentlemen," he announced in a wooden voice.

"I hope you are satisfied now, Harry," re-

marked his friend. "You have broken the bank."

"So it appears," coolly answered the fortunate youth, as he swept the money from the table, and thrust it carelessly into his pocket. "I am in luck, it seems. Had I not better follow up my fortune at some other table?"

"No! On your life, no! You were on the brink of ruin. A wonderful run of luck has saved you. A hundred and sixty thousand dollars is no trifle of a fortune. If you are open to wise advice you will leave this dangerous place, and never touch a card again."

The younger man gave a reckless laugh.

"A man that is bitten by that dog is not cured so easily," he answered.

Yet he followed his companion from the thronged room to a more open one.

Neither of them noticed two men, who had been closely watching them, and who entered this room just in their rear.

These persons now hurried forward, and the foremost of them appeared to stumble, and fell against the young gambler, jostling him so roughly as to nearly fling him to the floor.

The awkward fellow threw his arms around him to sustain himself, while his companion stepped forward as if to aid,

"Beg pardon," the fellow excused himself.
"My foot caught in that villainous carpet."

He hurried forward without waiting for an answer. His companion, who had taken but a step into the room, turned back and vanished into the thronged room behind.

All the young man saw was a short, square-built personage, with a bull neck, and rather shabbily dressed for that place.

"Hang the fellow's awkwardness," he muttered. "He nearly upset me. Come away from this place, Will. I've had enough of it for to-night. And I have something to tell you. I have not played the reckless fool you think me, quite without a reason."

A few minutes more found them in a carriage, driving rapidly away from that palace of gilded vice and despair, but not more rapidly than Harry talked as they drove onward, his companion listening in silence, though there was a growing impatience in his eyes.

"Confound you for a wild idiot!" he at length broke out. "Was it not enough for you to compromise yourself? I never heard of anything more foolish and ridiculous."

"She has not answered," cried Harry, distractedly. "She despises me. I am sure she does. She has driven me to desperation, Will."

"You? You had best think of *her* a little, and less of yourself. It was the act of a madman. Don't you know that her husband is the most jealous man in all America? And it is said that he reads all her letters! Suppose he should get hold of your mad epistle! There would be the very devil to pay."

"She is no fool. She will burn it," declared Harry.

"She may not have the chance. You had no right to expose her to such a danger."

"I didn't know what I was doing. I was distracted with love for the woman. I was wild—mad—insane."

"That is the truth. And you may have made a sweet pickle. If that crazy epistle falls into General Gordon's hands he will shoot you, as sure as you are a living man!"

Harry lay back on the cushions of the carriage, his eyes fixed straight forward. It was evident he was not thinking of the revenge of General Gordon.

"Do you think she will answer?" he queried in a pleading tone.

"Answer? Do you fancy she is as great a fool as yourself?"

"I tell you I am distractedly in love with her!"

"It is about time for an end to this, Harry Lindsay. You have no right to talk this way about another man's wife. She is a pure, good woman, and you have put her reputation in deadly peril."

"I can't help it. She has no right to be married to that cold-blooded politician, when I love her so madly."

Will threw himself angrily back. There was no use in talking to a fellow in Harry's mood. He was in the temper for any desperate act.

"Do you think she will answer?" he again queried.

"No. Not if she is the woman I take her to be."

"I think she will. I know she despises General Gordon. I know she more than half loves me. I am not blind."

Will clenched his teeth, but would not answer. It was idle to debate with such infatuation.

In a few minutes afterwards the carriage drew up before a house of some pretensions, in a quiet street.

The two friends entered and proceeded upstairs together, to a luxuriously furnished room on the second floor.

Harry threw himself in an easy chair, motioning Will to another.

He flung his hat to a sofa across the room.

"I can't make myself over, Will Benton," he said, in a reckless tone, "I have always gone straight toward my goal, without stopping to count obstacles. It is my way, and I always will. As for this mad letter, as you call it, I expect an answer."

"You will never get it."

"I will not, eh? What do you call this?" He laid his hand in triumph on a daintily folded epistle that lay on the red cover of the table. "Do you recognize that handwriting?"

Will looked at it, and drew his breath hard.

"Is the woman mad too?" he ejaculated.

With a laugh of hope and triumph the enamored youth drew his penknife and carefully opened the letter, while his face shone, and his eyes beamed with hope.

Will lay back and looked in a sort of grim despair at his infatuated friend. Here was a job he had not bargained for. It was an ugly business all through, and he scented trouble ahead.

But as he looked a change came over the lover's face. His flush gave way to pallor. His eyes grew troubled. The hand that held

the letter came down with a savage blow on the table, while a muttered oath left his lips.

"By Heavens, you are right, Will! I have played the idiot. There is a pretty kettle of fish."

"Ha!" cried Will. "I knew it. What is wrong? Did General Gordon read the letter?"

"Worse than that."

"Worse? What worse can there be?"

"It has got into worse than General Gordon's hands. It has been stolen by her deepest enemy, and the craftiest villain in Washington. Fool that I was, I have got her into a deuce of an ugly scrape. He will hold the letter over her, and make her the slave of his whims. I could kill myself for my madness. What shall I do, Will?"

"Kill yourself. That is the quickest way out of the scrape."

"That will not help her. She says I must get the letter back. It will be no easy job, for the man who has it is as cunning as a fox. And we dare not proceed openly. We dare not acknowledge that there is such a letter in existence."

"Who is the man?"

"Julius Martindale, of the Department of State."

"Good Heavens! That man? Why, all the detectives in America cannot match him in shrewdness."

"I must employ the sharpest of our detectives. That letter I must and will have. She says I must not hesitate to spend money freely. Thank the Lord for my luck on the red! A man can do a good deal with a hundred and sixty thousand dollars."

He was thrusting his hand into his pocket for the money, when Will checked him.

"You have a big job before you, Harry Lindsay," he coolly remarked. "You will have to change your hasty nature, and become as cool and cunning as the man you are dealing with. And for the first move, here is a light, there is that letter. It must be turned into ashes on the spot."

Harry started at these words.

"Burn it? The only thing I have in her handwriting?"

"Yes. Not a corner must be left."

"I cannot do it."

"Then I will."

He picked up the dainty sheet, lit it at the gas jet, and held it over the hearth while the flame quickly ran over its white surface.

The lover held his hand over his eyes, as if

the flame had been touched to the fingers of the lady herself.

"There; that firebrand is out of the way. You have brought me into this business, Harry, and I am going to manage it. You must have the best professional aid in Washington."

"Which I am in shape to pay for, thanks to dame Fortune," said Harry gayly, as he thrust his hand into the pocket into which he had crowded his winnings.

But a blank look suddenly came into his face. He shook as in an ague, while his eyes grew frightened.

"What is the matter, man? Have you seen a ghost?" demanded Will.

"It is gone!" came in a startled whisper.

"Gone? what is gone?"

"The money! My pocket is empty! I have been robbed!"

"The deuce!" Will slapped his knee in excitement. "You must be mistaken. It is in some other pocket."

"No, I put it in this. It is gone, I say."

Will looked at him half stupidly. Then a quick light came into his eyes.

"Ha! I have it now! The man who stumbled against you at the Casino!"

"That is it! cried Harry excitedly. "I was

robbed then! Fool that I was to give him the chance!"

The two friends looked at each other with troubled eyes. The game was deepening. There was already an ocean of work before them.

CHAPTER III.

A TRAIL THROUGH WASHINGTON STREETS.

THE incident at the Casino had not passed quite without observation. At the door of the room in which it occurred stood a slender, plainly dressed individual, with a thin, beardless face, and quiet gray eyes.

He was leaning against the door-post, carelessly switching his boot with a light cane.

The encounter had taken place so quickly that it was nearly over before his attention was attracted.

He raised his eyes with a quick movement and took in the scene at a glance. He was just in time to perceive one man vanishing into the gaming rooms.

The other was coming towards the door, against which he leaned. His eyes quietly scanned the face of the latter, while a peculiar expression came into those steel-gray orbs.

As the man passed through the door the observer caught the expressions of the two young

men. Then, with a quick movement, he turned and left the room.

The coarsely dressed personage was yet in the anteroom, walking hurriedly forward. The thin personage seemed to have business in the same direction.

A few minutes took them both into the street.

Others were coming and going, so that there was no sign of pursuit in this movement.

A dozen carriages stood before the door, which was brilliantly lighted.

The man, who had just reached the pavement, paused for a second only, then took a few steps southward, and turned and crossed through the line of carriages. He seemed seeking the shadowed region on the other side of the avenue.

His seeming pursuer lounged on as if looking for a carriage. There was no evidence of pursuit. Yet when the man in advance had reached a dark cross-street, and plunged into its gloom, the slender personage was not fifty paces behind him.

Up to this moment the pursued man had not paused for an instant, nor cast a glance behind him.

He had hastened onward like one in dread of

a hue and cry. Now, however, he stopped, turned sharply on his heel, and looked back keenly towards the lighted street.

There was nothing visible to arouse his suspicions. People were coming and going under the lights, but no evidence of excitement appeared, and the street in which he stood seemed deserted.

He muttered something in a tone of satisfaction, and pushed onward more leisurely, as if satisfied that he was in no danger.

He had hardly done so ere, from under the dark shadows of an overarching doorway, appeared the second individual, who put himself instantly on his track.

Quick and expert as the experienced fellow had been there was one in his rear who seemed quicker and more expert.

In that locality the streets of the capital form a perfect labyrinth, winding and crossing until only one thoroughly acquainted with the city could have gone rapidly through them at that hour without losing his way.

It was an awkward locality for pursuit, since the pursuer had to keep but a few paces in the rear, lest he should lose his prey in some of the intricacies of the dimly lighted avenues.

Yet so keen was the scout that the sharp fel-

low in advance never dreamed that there was a sleuth-hound on his track.

The footsteps of the pursuer fell like velvet on the stone pavement. No shadow of a sound came from them.

He glided along like a ghost close by the walls of the range of houses, avoiding every street lamp, halting for an instant in every doorway, crouching under every cornice.

With a seemingly habitual suspicion the man in advance kept looking dubiously around and behind him, like one who always scented danger in the wind.

But he saw and heard nothing. He was pursued by a specter rather than a man. The dark brown attire of the scout was in exact tone with the nightly shadows, and rendered him almost invisible.

Ere long a different locality was gained. That dark region of low warehouses and tumble-down offices was left behind, and the two men emerged into a broader and more open street.

Here there were numerous gas lights, and the deserted condition of the region just traversed was replaced by a steady flow of people, moving in both directions.

Carriages and cabs rolled swiftly by in the

street, and the full tide of life seemed in busy motion.

The pursuer now took a different course. He crossed the street and hurried forward until he had passed his prey, who was proceeding more slowly on the opposite side of the way.

Leaving him some distance in the rear he again crossed and walked towards him, timing his steps so as to meet him face to face beneath a gas lamp.

The steady gray eyes of the scout fixed themselves for an instant only on the coarse and thick-lipped face before him, now lit up by the full glare of the lamp.

There was an affectation of smartness about the man. A waxed mustache adorned his upper lip. He was dressed somewhat jauntily, though in well-worn clothing. But his smartness did not look natural. It seemed to have been put on for a purpose.

The alert scout let him pass. But the unsuspecting man had not gone far ere he was again under those quiet but keen eyes.

"I don't know him," said the pursuer to himself, with a dubious shake of the head. "But I must certainly make his acquaintance. He was not at the Casino without a purpose. And if I am not mistaken a certain young gentleman

will find himself with an empty pocket to-morrow. I must positively make this masquerader's acquaintance."

The chase continued through one or two miles more of Washington streets. With the untiring energy of the Indian scout the pursuer kept on the track of his unsuspecting prey. Finally he traced him into the squalid region of the Georgetown flats, that home of poverty, wretchedness and crime, where no well-dressed man is sure of his life for an hour unless under the protection of the police.

Yet the spy seemed as much at home here as in the more respectable street he had left.

One or two ruffianly individuals approached and glanced at him with fierce and hungry eyes.

But a single look from those gray orbs sent them scared and muttering away. It was as if a shaft of steel had shot into their brains from those keen organs.

One of those fellows looked after him with a murderous glare.

"'The Little Joker'" he hissed. "What ther blue blazes is he arter here? Like ter guv him a socker 'tween ther ribs, curse 'im! but mought as well try ter smash a flea with a fence rail. I'm desprat affeared on him, coz he's a perfect terror when he wakes up."

Heedless of the impression he might create, the "Little Joker," as he had been dubbed, kept on.

The streets were densely thronged with men, women and children, lounging around in squalid misery, many of them blear-eyed with drink, and most of them there through sheer worthlessness and incompetence.

No one could have told whom the Joker was pursuing. He seemed to see every face at once, and more than one ruffian shrank back from the glance of those gray eyes, in guilty consciousness.

Yet not for an instant did he lose sight of the man whose footsteps he had so long steadily tracked. He glided through the dense crowd with eel-like agility, and kept at an easy distance behind his prey.

Ten minutes more and the tracked man stopped in front of a house in one of the more respectable streets of that region. It was a brick building, of fair size, though very shabby in appearance.

Here the fellow announced his presence by pounding on the door. He lounged against the door-post while waiting for a response.

He had to pound again before any one came.

Then the door was opened and a frowsy-headed woman appeared.

"Ain't you folks sort o' slow motioned?" asked the man in a surly tone. "Most pounded my fist out in fetching you."

"Soak it in hot water and fotch it back again," said the woman, with an independent toss of her head. "I never come afore I'm ready. What's your want?"

"Isn't Slippery Joe in the house?"

"Guess not. Won't never find him here at this time 'o night. If you want Joe you'll have to try Mike Hardy's gin hole, round the corner, or Tony Blake's mill. Them's the places where he's most at home."

She was on the point of shutting the door in his face, but he thrust it open with his foot.

"Hold your level, old lady," he growled. "Can't you wait till a chap gets through? I've got something here 't ain't quite safe to carry about. I want you to take it, and lock it up safe in that oak chest of yours."

"What am I goin' to get fer it?" she demanded. "Im tired o' doin' somethin' for nothin'."

"When did Tom Bruce ever take without giving?" he queried sternly.

"Well, I reckon as how't that's so. Hand over the plunder then. 'Tain't nothin' to git me inter trouble?"

"If you don't blab yourself, you can bet I won't," he answered with a laugh. "Here's the stuff, Poll. It's safer in your hands than in mine, for if I get drunk I haven't any more sense than a bunch of beets."

He drew a package from his pocket and placed it in her extended hand.

"There. Hold tight on to that and you're good for a new Christmas gown."

Neither of them dreamed that a pair of ears on a very wide-awake head, were within ten paces, eagerly drinking in every word of this conversation.

"Reckon you'll find Joe down at Blake's," she said. "There's where he hangs round most o' his spare time, drat his picture."

"All right, Poll, I'll fotch him. Mind your eye about them spoils, and good-night."

He lounged away. The woman did not take the trouble to answer his good-night, but stood in the door, following him with her eyes.

"A despirat rascal, drat him," she muttered, "And ain't no good to Joe. But he's free-handed, I'll say that. Wonder what's in this bundle? He's a cute un, and allers has some joke afoot. Got to take good care on it, if I don't want my neck wrung."

At that moment a slender figure flashed out

of the shadows, flitted swiftly past her, and with an expert jerk tore the loosely held package from her hand.

"I'll save you the trouble of taking care of this, madam," spoke a mocking voice.

The woman stood for an instant completely dumbfounded. Then there came a scream from her lips loud enough to waken the dead.

She leaped from her doorway into the street, loudly screaming and vituperating. Several persons came running up, among them Tom Bruce, who had not got many steps away.

"What's the matter? Who has hurt you?"

"Robbers! Thieves! Bloody murder!" she yelled. "Chase him! Catch him! Kill him! Down that way he went. Kill the dirty reprobate!"

But the chase was all in vain. The alert thief had utterly disappeared. Not a trace of him could be found, though the alarm quickly spread for a mile around.

CHAPTER IV.

A FAIR WOMAN'S TROUBLE.

WE must return to the boudoir of Mrs. Gordon. She is not alone, and is not seated in her usual easy and luxurious attitude.

On the contrary, she is on her feet standing sternly erect, with flashing eyes and compressed lips, in front of a person with whom she is in conversation.

This visitor is no other than her declared enemy, Julius Martindale, whose thin lips are twisted into a diplomatic smile as he politely addresses her.

"It is well known that you have unbounded influence with General Gordon," he is saying, with his foxiest look. "Of course I cannot ask you to use it in my favor. We are at war, are we not, Mrs. Secretary Gordon? You have said so, at least. I am in favor of declaring peace, and a word from you to your husband—"

"That word will never be spoken," she curtly interrupted, clinching her fingers nervously.

"Do not be hasty, my dear lady. I think I can convince you that it will be to your interest to speak it."

"Ah! Then you have come here to threaten me?"

"To threaten? Oh, certainly not. Simply to advise. I really think you had better speak to General Gordon. Of course I could offer him an inducement myself. But I should be sorry to do anything to annoy you. I should be inconsolable."

He stood before her with an air of affected humility, yet there was something in his smile and in the look of his eyes that made the proud woman shudder. She knew very well what this man was capable of, and he had her in his power.

She turned so hastily as to overthrow the chair behind her, and strode excitedly across the room, heedless of its fall.

"Permit me," said the visitor politely, as he stepped forward and lifted the fallen chair.

Mrs. Gordon turned suddenly at the remark, and faced him.

Her breast was heaving with violent emotion, her face flushed, her eyes full of fire.

"*You snake!*" came in a concentrated hiss from her lips.

Then she hesitated, recoiled a step, and half rested upon a chair behind her, while a pallor replaced the flushing glow of her face.

"Very well, Julius Martindale," she said, hesitatingly, and with difficulty. "I will speak to General Gordon. I will try to move him in your favor. Will that suffice?"

"Thank you! Thank you a thousand times, my dear Mrs. Gordon."

"And now will you be kind enough to leave me? I would be alone. When I have given my word there is nothing more."

"I could not think of asking more," answered the oily politician, as he turned towards the door. "If I had a *letter* of assurance from you I could be no better satisfied. A very good day, my dear benefactress. I shall not hesitate to solicit your aid whenever I wish a favor."

He stepped from the room with his lowest bow and his softest smile, as if he had just parted with his dearest friend.

Mrs. Gordon remained, resting on the arm of her chair, with her hand sunk deep in its velvet cushions, as her eyes followed her cunning enemy from the room.

She seemed to gasp for breath, and her free hand was clinched as if the handle of a dagger lay within the slender fingers.

"Great Heaven, I would rather die than bear this!" she bitterly exclaimed. "And I can see that I shall have to bear it again and again. I am to be the stepping-stone on which this man will mount to fortune. He whom I hate as I hate the fiend! Oh! it is enough to make me kill myself!"

She sprang up and paced the room excitedly back and forth for several minutes, her face working as if with the pressure of tumultuous thought.

She stopped short at length, her face full of deep resolution.

"I must and will do it," she said. "It is the only course. I must see him, and dare not bring him here."

The next moment she had rung the bell with a strong pull, that quickly brought the maid-servant in response.

"Tell the coachman to get my carriage ready at once," she ordered, in a sharp, short tone. "Let him be at the door in fifteen minutes. Then bring me my cloak and bonnet."

During the absence of the maid she made some changes in her dress to adapt it for the street. And all was done with an impatience and eager haste that bespoke her agitation of mind.

Within the time given she was in her carriage, and had given her order to the coachman, who drove rapidly onward.

A half-hour of a somewhat winding course, and then the coachman drew up before a store in one of the main shopping thoroughfares of the city.

He sprang from his seat and opened the carriage door.

Mrs. Gordon left the carriage and entered the store, in which she remained some ten minutes.

Then she reappeared with a small package in her hand, which she threw into the carriage.

"Wait here for me, Joseph," she said. "I have another errand, but will walk."

She tripped onward with a light step, dozens of eyes fixed on the face of one who was known as the most beautiful woman in Washington.

As if weary of this scrutiny she let fall a thick vail that concealed her face. The gray cloth cloak which she wore, was also drawn closely around her, covering her rich dress.

As she appeared now, no one would have recognized in that plainly dressed figure the rich and showy Mrs. Gordon.

Leaving the business avenue, she entered a quiet side street that led from it.

It is not necessary to follow her movements step by step. It will suffice to say that in five minutes afterwards she was admitted to a house at some distance down this street.

Immediately afterwards a gentleman for whom she had asked entered the room in which she awaited him.

It was Harry Lindsay. He stepped towards the veiled and cloaked woman questioningly.

"Whom have I the honor of addressing, Madame?" he asked.

In an instant she had risen from her chair, flung open her cloak, and thrown aside her veil. The beautiful woman, in her rich attire, stood with a stern and dignified aspect before him.

He fell a step back, and lifted his hand to his eyes, as if he had been dazzled by the sudden vision.

Then he sprang quickly forward, with extended hands and flushed face.

"Mrs. Gordon!" he cried. "Lucile! You here? Can it be possible?"

"No more, Mr. Lindsay," she coldly replied, avoiding his offered hands. "We will spare any enthusiasm, if you please. After what has passed it is uncalled for."

Her cold eyes and steady tone recalled the excited youth to his senses. She was secretly

as much agitated as himself. But no trace of it was suffered to appear upon her calm, severe face.

"You have come here to upbraid me!" he exclaimed. "Say what you will, Mrs. Gordon. I deserve it all, and more. You cannot chastise me for my folly more bitterly than I have chastised myself. Tell me that I was a fool—a lunatic—I acknowledge it all in advance."

"You were worse than that," she steadily replied, though her lips trembled despite herself. "You were cruelly selfish. You considered yourself only. You failed to consider me. You cared not in what a terrible dilemma you might place me."

He stood before her, his burning eyes devouring her countenance with a passion he could not repress.

"I know it all!" he cried. "I admit it all. I was mad with love. I could not live longer without a word from you. I was—"

"No more, sir. I cannot listen to such language. You seem to forget that I am a married woman. And you insult me by hinting that I could listen to solicitations that are simply criminal."

She fell into the chair behind her, the repressed excitement now breaking into her face,

while she dashed away the tears that flushed her eyes.

Indignant as she was, it was evident that this handsome youth was not indifferent to the beautiful woman before him. Yet it was equally evident that she would have died rather than prove false to her duty to her husband, or admit the existence of any such feeling.

"Good Heavens, Lucile!" he cried distractedly. "What have I said, what have I done, to drive you to tears? I would kill myself rather than force a drop in pain from those beautiful eyes."

She recovered her composure after a moment and a smile came to her lips.

"I am not suffering," she replied. "But I could not help a momentary agitation. It is not this I came here for, and I am wasting time. The mischief is done, and cannot be undone by recrimination. You received my note? You know the painful position in which your wild act has placed me?"

"I know it too well. I would have shot myself, but that I felt it necessary to live to undo the work I have done. That cunning fox-hound Julius Martindale, has stolen the letter?"

"Yes."

"And threatens to use it as a whip over

you, to force you to work in his interests?"

"He has done more than to threaten. He has already used it for this purpose! I have been forced to promise General Gordon's influence in securing him the position of Commissioner of Customs."

"But that is not much!"

"That is but the beginning. No one can tell to what that man aspires, or for what deep ends he designs to use me."

"What shall I do? Shall I shoot the dog?" cried Harry, leaping up in a flame of rage. "But say the word, and I will kill him as I would a rat!"

"And be hung for your pains. No, no, not that." Her eyes grew softer as they rested on the handsome face of the excited youth.

"What then? Something must be done; and that quickly. You cannot and shall not remain in his power."

He started forward, and paced the room back and forth in high excitement.

"Defy him, Lucile. Do not let him use you as a tool. Defy him. Tell the truth to your husband. He may be angry. But what is his momentary anger to the slow torture of this dog's solicitations?"

"I dare not do so!"

“ Why ? ”

“ Because—because you do not know my husband. He is the most jealous of men. If he should know of the existence of that letter his anger would be frightful.”

“ It would not kill you. And he could not keep it up forever.”

“ But—” she hesitatingly began. “ But—it would kill you. He would murder you in his passionate rage.”

“ Kill me? And it is me of whom you are thinking, instead of yourself?” cried this unfortunate youth, in a tone of rapture, as he gazed eagerly into the face before him, that was tinged with an involuntary blush.

“ This is cruel in you, Harry Lindsay,” she replied, in a low, intense tone. “ You but make the burden you have laid upon me heavier to bear.”

“ Forgive me, Lucile,” he answered contritely. “ But hear me. If that is the source of your dread, do not fear for me. General Gordon will not harm me. I am quite able to take care of myself. And as for you, he shall not harm you, while I live.”

“ You talk at random,” she said angrily. “ You do not know him, I say. You are but a boy as yet. He is a proud, stern man, with a

volcano of passion under his calm exterior. Something else must be done. To reveal to him the existence of that letter would lead to your death and my disgrace. He would force it from the hands of the thief. He would read it with eyes blinded with jealousy. And you forget how idly and madly you wrote. You forget that you hinted at an understanding between you and myself which never existed. You forget how terribly your insane epistle would compromise me in the eyes of a jealous man."

Lindsay listened to her impassioned words with a look of concern and doubt.

"Yet something must be done," he said. "What can I do to undo my work? What do you advise?"

"You must do as I advised you in my note. He stole the letter from me. You must steal it from him."

"By Jove, I will! I will tear it from his vile carcass!"

"You will not find it on him. He is no fool, if he is a villain. That letter has been cunningly hidden. It will take the utmost shrewdness to recover it."

"There are some very cunning detectives in Washington. Sharp as Julius Martindale is, I fancy he can be matched."

"That may be. Yet the man who is hiding has always the advantage of the man who is seeking."

"I will employ a dozen of the best. I will spare no money. I will——"

He stopped suddenly, with a face full of confusion.

"What is the matter?" she asked in quick concern.

"I speak of sparing no money when I have no money. I was robbed last night of nearly my last penny. I was just about to engage a detective in my own behalf."

"Don't stop a moment for that. I will provide all necessary money. That letter must be regained if it costs a million. Here is money." She flung a full purse on the table. "Send me word by a trusty agent when you need more."

"I will need no more," he replied with a smile of confidence. "And this shall be repaid. You shall not pay for the mending of my fault."

"That is very well, but no hesitation must be felt now. This matter is too important for any scruples of pride to interfere. If money is needed it must be provided."

She rose as she spoke and adjusted her cloak. "I must go now," she said, turning to him

with a look of deeper meaning than she intended.

"I trust to you to redeem your fault."

"It shall be redeemed—but its cause not forgotten," he cried, catching her hand in his eager clasp, and gazing deeply into her soft eyes.

The next moment she was gone. But she had left a happy man behind her.

CHAPTER V.

A CONFAB WITH A DETECTIVE.

INTO a dark, gloomy building of the legal district of Washington, that bore the somber aspect of a prison, two men had just entered.

They made their way along the narrow hall, and up the dark stairway, with some growls of dissatisfaction.

"What in the world do they build such dungeons as this for?" exclaimed one. "The sunlight would be afraid to creep into this hole."

"It would be scared out again if it did," rejoined the other.

"Here we are, No. 15, third floor," said the first speaker, as he pointed to a name-plate on the door before him, which could be just read in the shadowy hall.

It bore the following words:

FRANK SHARP, PRIVATE DETECTIVE.

"That is our man," answered the other, knocking at the door,

"Come in," cried a voice from the room within.

They opened the door and entered.

The room in which they found themselves was a square apartment, of good size, and much better lighted than the passage outside.

It was furnished as an office, and at a table in its centre sat a small-sized man, of some thirty years of age, with a steady, quiet, but keenly intelligent face.

He lifted his eyes from his writing, and motioned his visitors to chairs.

"Excuse me for one moment, gentlemen."

He continued to write rapidly for a minute or two more. Then he folded and directed a letter, threw his pen aside, and pushed back his chair.

"I am at your service. What can I do for you?"

"We are in search of a detective, and have been directed to you, as the best man in America for the work we have in hand."

The detective smiled.

"That depends on the character of the work," he said.

"That I will tell you. But first let me introduce myself, and my friend. My name is——"

"Mr. Harry Lindsay. And your friend is Mr. William Benton," interrupted the detective.

"Ah! you know us then?"

"That is no proof of extra smartness. To know everybody is easier than to know everything. Yet a detective is expected to have no limit to his knowledge."

"I doubt if you know our business with you to-day," broke in Will.

"Don't be too sure of that, my dear sir," laughed the detective. "Suppose I draw you a picture, which I think you will recognize. Two nights ago there was some high play at the Casino, a noted gambling resort of our high-toned statesmen. One young gentleman risked his money at *rouge-et-noir* rather recklessly, in spite of the efforts of a friend to restrain him."

The visitors opened their eyes at this beginning.

"Yet the goddess Fortune favored the reckless man. He bet against ten thousand chances, and won. He broke the bank, and pocketed over a hundred and fifty thousand dollars in winnings."

"You were there, then!" exclaimed Will.

"I had on my ten-league spectacles," laughed the detective. "What next? The gamester thrust his winnings very carelessly into his

pocket, and the two friends left the gambling hall together, without observing that they were followed by two men."

"Two men?" questioned Harry. "I only saw one."

"That was the one who stumbled against you in the anteroom, and neatly slipped from your pocket the roll of notes which you had so carelessly thrust into it. The second fellow, finding that he was not needed, turned back into the Casino, while his comrade walked away with the stolen money."

"I saw the man who turned back into the Casino," ejaculated Will. "But I did not dream that he was connected with the affair."

"That was because you did not wear my ten-league spectacles. But I have not finished my picture. Shall I go on?"

"Certainly," answered Harry. "It is highly interesting."

"The successful thief plunged into the street, passed through the line of carriages, and wound through a mile or two of the darkest streets he could find, watching with a hawk's eyes lest he should be followed. But he saw not even a shadow behind him.

"Then he entered one of the worst districts of the East end, and made his way for a mile

more through the mob of drunken savages of that region. Finally he stopped at a certain house, brought a woman to the door by his knock, and gave his valuable spoils into her hands for safe keeping."

"You must be a wizard if you know all this," cried Harry, excitedly. "Get me that package of money, and five thousand dollars of it are yours for your trouble."

"Then you recognize the picture?" smiled the detective.

"The first half of it, at least. The last half we must take your word for."

"Not at all," answered Mr. Sharp, with a meaning look. "I can back up my story with substantial proof." He unlocked a drawer of the table as he spoke, and thrust his hand into it. "You owe me five thousand dollars, Mr. Lindsay."

His hand was withdrawn, and he laid a package, wrapped up in newspaper, before the astonished pair.

"I fancy you will find there your lost cash," he quietly affirmed.

"The deuce!" cried Will. "You don't mean to say that you have already tracked this thief, and recovered the money, and that before we told a soul of its loss,"

"It is a detective's business to know things by intuition," answered Mr. Sharp, "and not to wait for orders, when work offers. Will you admit now that I have proved my words, and knew in advance your business with me to-day?"

"No," answered Harry.

The detective looked at him in surprise.

"Was it not the recovery of that money?"

"That is but the smallest half of it."

"Aha! then there is something of importance in the wind? But I have already said that no one can be expected to know everything."

Yet Mr. Sharp looked a little taken aback. He had fired his shot, and missed half his game.

"By Jove, I see through it now," exclaimed Will. "There was a man of your figure leaning against the door of the room where the robbery took place. It was you, I recognize you now. You followed the thief and recovered the money."

The detective answered with a quiet smile.

"I have not opened that package to examine its contents," he said. "That was your business, not mine. But if I might venture a prediction I fancy you will find your hundred and sixty thousand dollars there, to the penny."

"By heaven," cried Harry, excitedly, "you are the man for my work! Five thousand dollars of this money is yours. And I am good for twenty-five thousand more if you can put my other job through as successfully."

He threw the valuable package carelessly in his lap, without opening it.

The detective looked up with strong interest.

"Then you have work cut out for me that you value at five times one hundred and sixty thousand dollars. That is the kind of work I want. I would sooner take a job of that kind for a song than a petty job for a fortune."

His eyes sparkled with expectation as he twisted his chair round the table, drew paper and pen to his hand, and prepared to take notes of the important business offered him.

The two friends drew up to the table.

"Are we fully secret here?" asked Harry. "Is there any danger of ears or eyes on our business?"

"None whatever. You can speak freely."

"The story I have to tell you is but a short one, but it is of the greatest importance. There are persons implicated, however, whose names cannot be revealed, even to you. I can only tell you what is necessary for your task."

"Very well. Proceed," answered the detective.

"A letter has been stolen from a lady of the highest social standing in Washington. So far as she is concerned there is no actual harm in the letter itself. But if it should fall into the hands of her husband it would compromise her fearfully. That letter must be recovered."

The detective looked at him with a questioning glance.

"If it be not destroyed?"

"There is no hope of that. It is of too much value to the thief. He is holding it over the lady as a whip, to force her to work in his interest. She has high influence in official circles and is being forced to use this influence in favor of the thief, under threat of his placing the dangerous letter in her husband's hands."

Mr. Sharp took some hasty notes of the conversation.

"This is an interesting matter," he said. "The job you give me may be an easy one or it may be very difficult. That depends largely on the character of the thief. You do right to conceal the lady's name. But it is necessary that I should know the thief. That is not one of your secrets?"

"Certainly not. Yet you have no common man to deal with. The letter was stolen by

Julius Martindale, a confidential clerk in the Department of State."

Mr. Sharp sat back in his chair, and fixed his eyes with a surprised look on the speaker.

"Martindale! The shrewdest man in Washington!" he exclaimed. "You are right. The task you give me will be no trifle. I cannot touch it unless I know everything. I must make no false moves in playing with such an antagonist."

"Everything that I know, except the lady's name," answered Harry.

"That may not be necessary," rejoined the detective, with a look that had more in it than it revealed.

It was in vain to seek to keep the lady's name secret from him. He would soon know it. That was what his look meant.

The conversation continued at some length, Harry answering the shrewdly put questions of Mr. Sharp.

"That will do," he said at length. "I have my case before me now. If I recover that letter I shall have earned my money, Mr. Lindsay."

"That reminds me that I owe you five thousand dollars as it is," rejoined Harry, picking up the package that lay in his lap.

"One word more," remarked Will. "Have

you formed any theory as to the disposition of the letter, Mr. Sharp?"

"I am satisfied that it is in existence, that it is in the city, and that it is where Martindale can lay his hand on it at an hour's notice. He is playing with edged tools, and must keep that letter where he can use it at once, if necessary. He is as bold as he is cunning. He will not hesitate to use his power if the lady rebels against his demands."

"Then your field of search is narrowed down."

"I hope to find it on his person, or in his house. But everything has to be done with the secrecy of the grave. If he should discover that a search is being made the letter will vanish. It is a most difficult and delicate task, with a man like him."

"I have confidence in your ability after your wonderful skill in recovering this stolen money," remarked Harry. "And here is the fee I promised for this job."

He finished unfolding the package as he spoke. But his eyes opened wide with astonishment when, instead of the expected cash, only a parcel of folded papers met his eyes. He looked up to the equally astounded detective.

"What does this mean?" he cried.

Mr. Sharp sprang to his feet, with an exclamation of chagrin and astonishment.

"By all that's good. I have been fooled!" he cried. "The fellow has twigged me on his track, and left this as a gull's bite! And the other man has the money! I thought I was playing a sharp game; by the Lord Harry they have dished me!"

"It looks like it," said Will, dryly.

"I fancy they will find they have the wrong pig by the ears," continued the detective, with a look of confidence as he recovered his composure. "Who was the thief's confederate? That is the question now. I have one of them under my thumb. I must lay for the other. You shall have your money back, Mr. Lindsay."

"I hope so," remarked Harry, dubiously. "But had you not better examine those papers, Mr. Sharp? They have a highly respectable look. You may be mistaken in their character."

He threw the package, which contained three or four official-looking documents, on the table.

Mr. Sharp opened it, and quickly ran his eye over the first of the papers. A sudden look of interest came into his eyes. He snatched up a second, opened it hastily, and read its headlines. A whistle of astonishment came from

his lips; his face took on a look of complete bewilderment.

"By all that's good, here's rich sport! How did these documents fall into that fellow's hands?"

"What are they?" asked the two friends eagerly.

"Documents worth more than their weight in gold. This is a highly important state paper, the draft of a secret commercial treaty between the United States and Russia. It has been stolen from the Record Room of the Department of State; there will be the very old Nick to pay if it is missed."

They gazed at one another with staring eyes. Here was a matter of life and death.

CHAPTER VI.

A STREET MASQUERADE.

"It never rains but it pours," declared to himself the detective, as he lounged back in his office chair, and looked into the vacancy before him.

"Two hours ago I was out of work. My last job was wound up, and I was open for a holiday. I was debating whether to run up to Long Branch or go to the Adirondacks for a week's shooting.

"That little point's settled now. Here's work crowding in by the pailful. And none of your petty pickpocket jobs, but work for a master of the profession. The man who gets the best of Julius Martindale in a game of wits will be fit to play at dice with the devil himself.

"Yet I am in for it. They that never try never win. And thirty thousand dollars is not to be picked up at every back gate."

He lit a cigar, leaned further back in his

chair, and fell into a deep fit of reflection, as the fragrant smoke slowly curled up to the ceiling.

"There are three items to be considered," he resumed. "And I strongly suspect that these items are closely connected. The stolen letter, the loss of Lindsay's money, and the State documents.

"It is impossible that Julius Martindale would take part in a pickpocket scheme. Yet what mean these official papers in that thief's possession? The official documents of the Department are in Martindale's care. Who else could get at them? By Jove, there's a hard knot here, that will need neat picking to open.

"Can Martindale be mixed up with a gang of villains, with Tom Bruce and Slippery Joe as samples? If I can track these documents to him he is ruined. These papers are like fire, they will burn every hand into which they fall.

"Yet why should he steal them? He could not use them, and dare not publish them. Have they been stolen by somebody else, for the purpose of getting a hold on Martindale? That may be the true theory, for any one might as well offer the Treasury plate for sale as private government documents like these."

He rose, knocking the ashes from his cigar, and walked the floor in a quandary. The more he thought the more complicated the case seemed. There was a perfect snarl before him, with no visible means of untangling it.

"Yet I hold one trump card," he considered. "The possession of those papers puts Martindale in my power. They give me the whip-hand if I should need to put screws on that gentleman."

"And I hold one loose thread in the snarl. Tom Bruce is my strong point in the game. I must put that gin-bibbing worthy under shadow at once. And then for Martindale, and my search for the stolen letter."

Seizing his hat and putting on his street coat, Mr. Sharp left the room. It was necessary to begin somewhere, and he had made up his mind where. He could make nothing of the case by thinking. He wanted more facts. His course lay towards the headquarters of the city detective service. He needed help in this business. Not that he had any idea of sharing his case with other detectives; but he wanted some of the police spies who could be always found in that locality, ready for any job. And he might need aid in many other directions, that were dimly opening before him.

After a conference with some of the most skillful of these worthies, Mr. Sharp left headquarters in company with one of them he had engaged for immediate duty.

But it would have been difficult to recognize him as the spruce, quick-stepping, neatly-dressed Frank Sharp of an hour before.

He was now dressed in a suit of infinite shabbiness. His hat looked as if it had been kicked through ten gutters before it descended on his mop of sandy hair. His face was blotched and wrinkled, and there was a rambling looseness in his gait, as if he had just come through a ten weeks' drunk.

The disguise was a decided success. No one would have taken him for anything but a boozing tramp, whose time was evenly divided between the road, the county poor-house and the gin-palace.

An artist had been at work upon his face, in laying out its wrinkles and whisky blotches, and in adding twenty years to its age.

His companion was a tall, thin fellow, as disreputable in appearance as himself. There was a slinking looseness in their gait, as they made haste away from that locality, as if they had spent their lives in avoiding the police.

"A sweet pair of innocents we are, Jacob, my

lad," said Mr. Sharp approvingly, as he looked at his comrade, and then at himself. " You are an artist in that line."

" I rayther calkerlate I'm not the wust goin'," answered Jake in a thick voice, and an accent in keeping with his appearance.

The detective laughed.

" Don't be putting on airs, my good fellow. Save that till we reach dangerous ground."

" All ground is dangerous," answered Jake briefly. " There's ears and eyes hangin' round everywhere. I allers lives up to my characters from the start-out."

Their course continued until they had reached the locality to which Mr. Sharp had recently tracked his thievish prey.

Here the two sorry looking fellows were in their true element. Dozens of others as disreputable as themselves wandered around, mainly employed not in looking for work or a meal, but for an opening to imbibe.

Here the walk of the disguised confederates became a tipsy swagger, and their talk that of two rum-soaked vagrants who were spoiling for a drink.

They passed through the street in which the detective had created such a sensation on his former visit. The house was tight closed,

and no sign of the loud-tongued woman was visible.

"Here resides Slippery Joe, one of the men with whom you may have business," said Mr. Sharp, in a low tone. "But we must seek our game at this hour in their favorite rum shops."

The street which they next entered was brimful of life. It was a business avenue, of a not very attractive kind. Stores, not of second-hand, but rather of fourth or fifth-hand clothing, furniture, etc., embellished both sides of the filth-laden street. Restaurants, garnished with cold bits, the refuse of the more respectable localities, many of them begged at area doors and sold to these sorry establishments, appeared here and there.

Pawnshops, where pennies were lent on rags, were not wanting. And establishments for the retailing of liquid poison were there in fair abundance.

These latter were the most showy and the best patronized of the many business concerns of the street.

They made a great pretense to smartness, and with glaring signs, bright lights, and much display of flashing glass, sought to draw customers into their perilous maws.

It was the splendor of ruin which they held out as a trap to the dissolute and the unwary.

"Yere's the boozin' ken we'se arter," spoke the detective, pointing to a sign on one of these establishments:

"TONY BLAKE."

Imported Wines and Whiskies.

"I'm just as dry as a squeezed sponge on a red-hot stove," rejoined the spy. "Le'ss likker."

Arm in arm they entered the saloon, with the stagger of half tipsiness.

It was a large square room, with a flaring show of crystal behind the long bar, before which stood a group of customers, blear-eyed, ragged, and bloated with rum.

A half-dozen tables on the other side of the room offered some pretense of respectability.

One only of these was occupied, and that by two ill-favored fellows who were talking loudly over a pot of beer.

Jake's eyes sought his employer's face, but the latter gave a hardly perceptible shake of the head.

Calling for whisky they received a full glass each of some high-colored decoction.

The detective looked at it in dismay. Was he expected to imbibe this half pint of mystery?

He held it up for a moment, as if admiring its color.

"Calkerlate we'll anchor, landlord. Been browzing round, we has, more nor less."

"Plank down the ready first. Ain't no free blows in this shop," rejoined the surly landlord.

Taking the hint Mr. Sharp paid for the liquor with a great reaching for the few pennies he finally brought up.

"Ain't strapped yet, nary time," he declared, as he tacked on a sailor's course towards one of the tables.

Here the two seeming tipsy cronies sat and talked, with a pretense of sipping their liquor, most of which went on the floor.

A half hour passed, and the bottoms of the glasses were visible.

"No returns," queried Jake, looking his employer in the eye.

"Guess we'd best toddle on,—or stay. Here's meat for our gridiron."

A long, slim, ugly-faced fellow had just entered the saloon, and glided up to the bar with something of stealthiness in his step.

He was much better dressed than the other customers present, and looked like a man of different tone.

Yet there was an evil bearing about the fel-

low, and an active wariness in the suspicious glances of his half-closed eyes.

"What'll yer take, Joe?"

"Nix. Ain't dry," answered the new customer. "How's the wind? Tom been around?"

"No."

"Reckon I'll wait then. It's near about his droppin'-in time."

The fellow seated himself at the table, and drew a newspaper from his pocket.

A wink passed between the disguised confederates. Jake pounded with his fists on the table.

"What's wanted?" queried the landlord.

"Jist drop over yere, an' fill up these flowin' bowls agin, old rooster. Reckon we ain't out o' shiners yit."

The new customer let fall his paper, and fixed his eyes with a steady look on the brace of ill-dressed strangers. He seemed to be quickly satisfied as to their character.

"Dead beats," he muttered, as he resumed his reading.

Another half-hour passed, during which the brace of spies had filled their glasses twice more, and had the floor all in a puddle with spilled whisky. From the thickness of their tongues they seemed to be growing more tipsy.

At the end of this time another person entered the room. Mr. Sharp apparently did not see him. He raised his glass with an unsteady hand, and seemed busy admiring its contents.

Yet his foot touched that of his comrade under the table. Jake at this signal, let his head fall with a drunken lurch on his arm. He seemed too full to hold himself erect.

The man opposite them dropped his newspaper and rose in his stealthy manner to his feet.

"Glad to see you," he said. "Been waiting."

"Dry?"

"No."

"Let's wet the bar anyhow."

The two men drank, and then walked together from the saloon.

During this colloquy the spies had been occupied in drunken blather, utterly senseless in character.

Yet the two men had no sooner passed through the door than the detective rose unsteadily to his feet, and staggered towards the portal.

"What yer hangin' there fur, old boozer? Ain't goin' ter take lodgins? "

"Reckon not," answered Jake. "Guess we'd best navergate."

A moment found them outside.

"The second fellow is Tom Bruce. The first is Slippery Joe," whispered the detective, "There's something in the wind. Our game is opening."

CHAPTER VII.

NEW CHESTNUTS IN THE FIRE.

THE brace of villainous confederates made their way with some rapidity through the crowded street, shoving aside its slouching inmates with little ceremony, and calling forth more than one savage growl or threatening oath.

Heedless of this they pushed onward. They were evidently too well known to dread resistance.

Yet the characters of the two men were plainly shown in their manner. Slippery Joe glided around obstacles with the stealthy tread of an Indian. Tom Bruce walked straight on, and shouldered them rudely from his path.

He was a man of very different mould from his companion. There was about him the bold and resolute look of one who is capable of daring enterprises. His face had none of the hang-dog expression of Slippery Joe, and was not lacking in rough good looks.

Yet he was evidently wary and wide-awake, and a thorough adept in his dangerous business.

Just here, however, the brace of villains did not dread danger. They did not dream of the pair of sorry-looking reprobates, who were following them at no great distance behind.

"So you've twigged your man?" queried Joe, with a look of admiration at his companion.

"Yes."

"You don't mind sayin' who?"

"It ain't no slouch, now, you bet."

"Didn't s'pose as how it was."

"I found out who was on at the Casino that night."

"And who was it?"

"Frank Sharp, the smartest fluke on the force."

Joe gave a whistle of surprise.

"The Little Joker?"

"Nary a less."

"Holy Moses, but he's a honey to handle! So he's the coon as snatched them dokyments. Don't b'lieve the pair on us 'll be any match for him."

"Won't, eh! Ain't goin' to take water, are you?"

"Do my prettiest," said Joe, in a half scared

tone. "But the Joker's wuss nor a wild-cat to handle."

"Now that's all flat pancakes. I kin pick out a dozen lads as could discount him. Jist you carry out the plan I've laid down, and you kin snap your fingers at Mr. Sharp. And five hundred dollars ain't nothin' to be sneezed at."

"Reckon' it ain't!" cried Joe in enthusiasm. "Never handled more nor half it, in one pile, in my born days. Say what's to be did, and I'm yer hoss. Give me somethin' in my line and you bet I'll do the Joker."

"I know your style, Joe. I didn't pick you out blind. Now shut your tater trap and open your ears, and I'll let you inter the biz."

They had by this time passed through the thickest of the throng, and the most of this conversation had taken place in a less densely peopled street. As they continued to talk they gradually left that locality behind them, and reached a range of streets poorly lighted, and nearly deserted at that hour.

Their talk proved so interesting as to have one important effect. It reduced their wariness. Not dreaming of pursuit they walked on without taking the trouble to look behind them.

Yet if they had looked they would have seen nothing suspicious.

The two staggering, boozy, ragged worthies, who had kept close behind them in the crowded and disreputable quarters just left, had disappeared.

No trace of them was anywhere visible, and it seemed as if they had given up the chase.

Just now there were only two persons going the same way with the pair of pickpockets.

One of these looked like a merchant's clerk, on his way home after being detained late at the office.

The second, who was on the opposite side of the street, was tall and slender. He might have passed for a respectable mechanic, out for an evening's amusement.

These two men seemed to have no connection with each other, and to be paying no attention to the pair in advance. They were simply going the same way and at the same pace. That was all.

And yet their errand seemed somehow to take them through the same streets followed by the law-breaking couple.

It was, in fact, the detective and his companion, and this was but an evidence of their skill in the art of disguise.

Mr. Sharp had simply slipped off his ragged coat and revealed a brown, well-fitting coat beneath. Removing his sandy wig, and deftly turning his cap inside out, his head gear grew suddenly respectable. A damp sponge rubbed across his face removed his discolored blotches.

He had been transformed, as if by magic, from a bloated tramp into a sober merchant's clerk.

A series of similar movements had produced a like effect upon Jake.

No one could have recognized them for the brace of tipsy swaggerers they had appeared an hour before.

But of all that was going on in their rear, Tom Bruce and Slippery Joe remained in blank ignorance.

They walked on busily laying their plans of roguery without a suspicion that a pair of the keenest rogue-catchers in the country were on their track.

Not until they had reached a locality a mile or two from their starting-point did they display any signs of wariness.

Then they began to look around and behind them, with eyes sharpened by continual danger.

Yet nothing suspicious was observable. Of the dozen or more men who were within sight

none seemed to pay the slightest attention to the confederates.

Least of all did that slight-built personage, who was walking steadily by on the opposite side of the street, or that tall individual, who was looking into a shop window, appear to heed them.

Yet within less than five minutes afterwards these two personages came together, under the shelter of a dark doorway. There was a look of surprise on the face of the slight individual.

"What is in the wind now?" he asked curiously.

"Can't say," was the answer.

The two confederates had come to a halt before a gloomy-looking edifice, in a nearly deserted and poorly lighted street. They were looking warily around them, and conversing in low tones.

The next minute they turned and entered the open doorway of the building before them.

"What in the thunder do they want in the Chancery block? My office is in that building," exclaimed the surprised detective.

"I know it," answered Jake, in his short manner.

"Has that cunning rascal smelt out the rat?

Has he traced the loss of his documents to me? And is he here to recover them?"

"Looks like it," rejoined Jake.

"Most decidedly. Let us after them. I'm sadly afraid their neat plan won't work."

"Rather calculate not," grinned Jake.

They entered the building, in the rear of the villainous pair.

It was dark within, and seemed deserted. But Mr. Sharp knew it thoroughly, and walked forward without hesitation.

"Where is the janitor?" he asked.

"He has our gentlemen in tow," remarked Jake. "I hear voices up-stairs, and there is a light."

"That's a fact. They are daring rascals, at any rate. Remain here, Jake. I will follow them alone."

Jake stood obediently in the shadowy hall, while his employer disappeared up the gloomy stairway.

Several minutes passed. All was silent about the great dark edifice. There was something very depressing in the situation. But Jake was a man without feeling or sentiment. Nothing could depress or elevate him.

At the end of this interval Mr. Sharp reappeared.

"I can't make out just what is going on up there," he remarked. The janitor has left them. Here he comes. I will get it from him."

The light of a lamp or candle appeared at the head of the stairs accompanied by the sound of a heavy footstep, and a growl of dissatisfaction.

"Confounded queer time for a new renter to put in," he grumbled. "And a lodger at that.—Who's there?—Oh, it's you, Mr. Sharp?"

"Yes. What are you saying about lodgers?"

"Just been showing one to his room. No 42. Same corridor as yours. Was here this afternoon and rented, and had a cot put in for lodging. Isn't often our renters sleep in their rooms, but there's no rule to hinder."

"Weren't there two?"

"One's only staying to see his friend comfortable. He'll be down and away in a minute."

"I don't know that it is any affair of mine," remarked the detective, ascending the stairs.

At a sign Jake came up after him.

They reached the floor on which the detective's room was situated. Here they drew back into a dark side corridor.

"We shall have to divide forces here, whis-

pered the detective. "It will not do to lose sight of either of these gentlemen. If Tom Bruce leaves I will follow him. If Slippery Joe goes out he is your meat. You understand."

"Yes.—Hush! a door is opening."

They heard some words in a low tone, and then footsteps came along the hall. From where they stood they could just distinguish the outlines of a shadowy form.

But the steady, erect figure was very different from that of Slippery Joe.

"It is my man," whispered the detective. "That settles our game. You will stay here. Take the key of my room. You can be ready to receive visitors if any call."

"All right," said Jake grimly.

"I must find what other chestnuts our friends have in the fire."

The next moment he was noiselessly descending the stairs, on the track of the man who was dimly visible in advance.

Again the process which we have just described began. Through street after street walked the unconscious villain in advance. Through street after street, like his shadow, glided the detective scout in his rear.

A couple dozen squares of this process brought them to a very different part of the city. They

were now in the fashionable quarter. Brilliant gas-lights here gave the wide streets almost the lustre of daylight. Carriages rolled to and fro on the well-paved avenue. A throng of gay pleasure-seekers filled the sidewalks.

There was no longer any need for the detective to be wary. Pursuit would not be suspected here.

Bruce walked on with a sturdy step, quite as ready to elbow the people here as those of the quarter he had lately left. He was a bold rogue, who knew his rights in the streets.

He left this avenue after a while and entered a quieter one.

Here he stopped in front of a modest house, ascended the flight of steps, and rung the bell with a pull of assurance.

The door was quickly opened by a servant, whose eyes ran over the costume and appearance of the visitor with a supercilious look.

“Is Mr. Morton in?”

“Can’t answer,” was the bluff reply. “Don’t believe he’ll be in to you.”

“You don’t, eh?” remarked Bruce, with a sneer. “Well, as I happen to have an engagement with the gentleman, I do. Maybe you’d best show me in.”

The servant looked in doubt at this questionable visitor.

"See here, Dennis, I don't calculate to dance on this door-step all night to please you. Here is my card. Hand it to your master."

The servant disappeared, leaving the visitor on the step. He returned after several minutes, with a change of manner.

"Sorry to keep you," he said. "But didn't know as you were an acquaintance of Mr. Morton. Walk in, sir. Walk in."

The detective, who had not missed a word of this talk stood in a quandary.

"Morton? who is Morton?" he cogitated, "Have I another end of the thread here? There is an interesting understanding between Mr. Morton and Mr. Bruce, that is evident."

CHAPTER VIII.

DIAMOND CUT DIAMOND.

"MORTON? Yes, we have the name here. Several specimens of it. What Morton?"

These words were spoken by a man who was turning over the pages of a large, leather-bound account book, in a prison-like room on whose shelves, rows of similar books were visible.

It was the fire-proof record room of the Washington police service.

"Henry Morton," remarked Detective Sharp, to whom these words were spoken.

"Here it is. One item only. Professional burglar. Sent up two years ago for cracking a crib down at Georgetown. Still serving time. Is that your man?"

"No. My man is living now in style on Leffingwell Terrace."

"Then we haven't got him. Under that name I mean. We may have him under twenty others. Have you any further points?"

Detective Sharp shook his head.

"I know the man's name. That is all yet. But I predict that you will have that name on your books before next Christmas.—What is it?"

This was asked of a messenger who had just entered the room, and was looking round him inquiringly.

"I am looking for Mr. Frank Sharp, the detective."

"I answer to that name. What can I do for you?"

"You are wanted at once, at these directions."

He handed the detective a slip of paper.

An exclamation of surprise broke from the officer's lips as his eyes fell upon it.

"Julius Martindale?" he exclaimed. "He want me? Well, well, the soup is thickening. Who brought this?"

"A messenger boy, who is waiting outside."

The detective turned on his heel and walked from the room.

Work was brewing, that was sure. The game seemed to be playing into his hands. What could Martindale want? Could it have any possible reference to the work he had already in tow?

There was but one way to get an answer to

this question. After a word with the messenger, who told him that Mr. Martindale wanted him without delay, Mr. Sharp left police headquarters and hurried to his office.

Here he found Jake on guard.

"Anything turned up?" he asked

"No. Slippery Joe hasn't as much as winked!"

"I think I had better remove temptation from that gentleman's path" laughed the detective, as he thrust the stolen documents into his pocket. "I may have need of these. You are at liberty for to-day, Jake. Your man is a night bird."

Mr. Sharp made some slight changes in his clothing. He then hurried down stairs and called a cab.

An hour afterwards he was landed in front of a pretentious mansion in the most aristocratic quarter of the city.

His ring was answered by a colored servant, of elaborate dignity. The house which he entered was spacious in halls and apartments, and furnished expensively.

The detective looked around him keenly, as he followed the servant.

"Martindale believes in putting his best foot foremost," he said to himself,

In a moment more he was ushered into the presence of the master of the house, in a large, library-like room, plainly but richly furnished.

The ends of the room were occupied by book-cases, well filled with volumes. One side was adorned with a handsome tiled fire-place and carved mantel. Several expensive oil-paintings hung on the other.

As he entered, the proprietor of the mansion was walking up and down the room, with a nervous and impatient tread, his face working with some secret source of trouble.

He turned quickly on the entrance of his visitor.

"Thank you for coming so promptly," he said. "I believe I speak to Mr. Frank Sharp, private detective?"

"Yes, sir," was the quiet answer.

"Pray be seated. I have something for your ear."

The officer quietly seated himself. He had not taken a look around the room, and had but glanced at the face of his host. Yet a glance was enough to satisfy the quick-witted detective that Mr. Martindale was in trouble.

The latter threw himself in a chair and in turn looked at his visitor, with a stealthy glance that was habitual to him.

He was a man who lived in distrust of everybody and everything.

Mr. Sharp's eyes were fixed on the paper-strewn table, and his face utterly empty of expression. It was a play of wits between two wide-awake men.

"I have been advised to apply to you," began Mr. Martindale, "as one of the best men in the country to take hold of a difficult and delicate job."

"I can give you the names of better men," replied the detective calmly.

"You are modest, sir. I must trust your friends' report rather than your own."

Mr. Sharp's eyes met his for the first time.

"I am at your service," he said. "But you must not ask me to work miracles."

Mr. Martindale smiled.

"This gentlemen is too modest by half," he said to himself. "Is he playing a game?"

"Do you know who I am?" he asked.

"Mr. Julius Martindale, in the secret service of the Department of State, is too well known to need an introduction," was the polite reply.

"You are probably aware that I am custodian of the highly valuable secret records of that office?"

"I am," answered Mr. Sharp, with little surprise at this remark.

"Then I may as well open to you at once my purpose in sending for you. A robbery has taken place in that office. Some of the most valuable papers have been stolen. How and by whom it has been done I cannot imagine, but their loss places me in a delicate position. They must be recovered, if all America has to be raked to its dregs."

Mr. Sharp fixed his steady eyes on the somewhat disturbed face of the speaker. He was as unmoved as if revelations of this importance were every-day matters to him.

"This is a secret?" he queried.

"And must remain so."

"The discovery of the loss of those papers would ruin you?"

"It might compromise me, at any rate," admitted the cautious official. "I discovered their loss not two hours ago, and have not been easy in mind since. I sent for you at once. Will you undertake the case?"

"At what fee?" asked Mr. Sharp.

"Five thousand dollars, if you put the papers into my hands within a week."

The detective looked at him quietly and coldly. He had not yet taken a single glance

around the room. One would have said that he had no interest in furniture or ornament.

"You forget the magnitude of the task," he remarked. "I should advise you to send for a cheaper detective."

"Five thousand dollars is no trifle," rejoined Mr. Martindale, with some surprise.

"You would find a thousand men to take the case at that figure."

"But I want you."

"And my lowest price is ten thousand dollars; one half down when I name you the thief, the other half when I hand you the papers."

"You seem to have confidence in yourself, sir," exclaimed Mr. Martindale. "One would think you were ready to name the thief to-day."

"I am."

Mr. Martindale was evidently very much surprised.

"It is only two hours since the theft was discovered," he declared. "It is impossible that you should know anything about it."

"Do you suspect any one?" asked Mr. Sharp.

"No. I am all at sea."

"Then be kind enough to name over the employés in the office, and any one else who could possibly have access to the records."

"I hardly know a person who could," was

the reply. "The keys are strictly under my care."

"And you would therefore be held responsible for any loss? I should have fixed my fee at fifteen thousand. But no matter. Give me the names. I will pin the thief when you come to him."

Mr. Martindale looked incredulous. He fixed his eyes keenly on the impassive face of the detective.

"I doubt your ability," he said. "But I will put it to the test."

He ran over a series of names, watching the detective closely as he gave them out, one by one. But the latter sat quietly back in his chair, without a word or sign.

"That is all," remarked Mr. Martindale. I can think of no other person directly connected with the office."

"You have not named the thief yet. Who are indirectly connected with it?"

Another series of names were given by the secretary. Mr. Sharp shook his head.

"This is folly," cried Mr. Martindale impatiently, "I did not send for you to be amused by child's play. I cannot name all Washington for you to guess at."

"Then I must add to your list. You have omitted one name."

"What name is that?" was the quick query.

"Henry Morton."

If an explosion of gunpowder had taken place under Mr. Martindale's chair, he could not have leaped up more suddenly. The chair was overturned in his haste, and he walked the floor excitedly back and forth, with a red face, and muttered exclamations.

Mr. Sharp was decidedly surprised by the effect of his words. But he showed no more signs of it than if he had been made of wood.

"What do you mean?" cried the disturbed official, halting and fixing his eyes angrily on the detective's face. "What you say is folly! Folly, I tell you."

Mr. Sharp smiled knowingly.

"I never move my men till I have studied the game," he said.

"But my nephew! My special favorite! An innocent youth like him! What do you know that gives you the right to make such an accusation?"

"I know nothing. I did not know this relationship to you. I had not heard his name twenty-four hours ago. And yet you owe me five thousand dollars."

"That remains to be proved," cried Mr. Martindale, with a strong effort to recover his

composure. " You are dealing in enigmas, sir."

" To deal in enigmas is my business," was the steady reply. " As for the innocence of this youth, you are sadly mistaken, Mr. Martindale. I do not know Henry Morton. I never set eyes on him. Yet I am satisfied that he is one of the sharpest reprobates in Washington. He simply must be that to deceive a man of your reputation for shrewdness."

" An accusation is no proof," exclaimed Mr. Martindale, still angry. " I tell you still that I do not believe you. Prove what you have said, and the money is yours. Fail to do so, and by heavens—"

" I have no idea of failing," remarked the unmoved detective. " If you will do as I say, my words shall be proved, and the papers returned to you."

" What do you propose ? "

" Send your nephew to me here alone. I will remain here and wait till he comes. But don't give him a hint of your object, or of my profession. If you do, he will be off to Canada within two hours."

" What shall I tell him to overcome the suspicions of the keen rogue you would make him out to be ? "

Send for him as from yourself. Name any business that is likely to bring him here without delay. But be careful to leave the house yourself. I must deal with him alone. Direct your servants to send him to you in the library."

"Very well. It shall be done," answered Mr. Martindale briefly. "I would not, even to recover those papers, have what you hint prove true. But you shall have your opportunity.

He walked from the library leaving the detective alone there. He was more confounded by what had passed than he had ever been before in his life.

Yet Julius Martindale was too used to trickery not to suspect some double dealing behind all this.

He muttered to himself as he walked away.

"That man's manner was not natural," he said. "He studiously avoided taking an observation of the room. An ordinary man, without a grain of curiosity, would scarcely have kept his eyes so moveless. In a detective it is out of reason. He is playing a part, and has overplayed it. His lack of interest is assumed, and I would wager his ten thousand dollars, fee that he is here in search of Mrs. Gordon's letter, and that he has devised this sorry trick

to get me out of the way to give him a few hours' free play. As for Henry Morton, this story is simply incredible. Very well, my smart sir, I only hope you may find your letter, but I doubt your success."

A grim smile curled his lips.

'I will carry out the programme, at all events. My nephew shall be sent to him. And he may have a free field for his search. I knew it would come, and they may as well have their opportunity.'

He smiled still more knowingly as he walked on. It looked doubtful whether the stolen letter was concealed in that house.

CHAPTER IX.

A TRAP FOR A FOX.

THE keen-witted official was right. His visitor, in his studied lack of curiosity, had not made allowance for the character of the man he was dealing with. Sharp as he was, Martindale had seen through him.

Hardly had the latter disappeared ere the detective became suddenly wideawake to the condition of the room. The footsteps of the retiring man had not died away before the scout had a picture of the whole apartment in his mind's eye.

He lay back in his chair, lost in deep reflection, while his active eyes continued to survey the surroundings.

"I have two good hours," he said to himself. "An active man can do a good deal in that time. To begin with, there is no use to search ordinary hiding places. What Julius Martindale hides will be well hidden. It is the un-

likely, not the likely, that I have to deal with here.

He sprang from his seat and turned the key in the library door, to prevent unwelcome intrusion. He then began a methodical examination of the contents of the room.

Thoroughly experienced in his art the shrewd detective rapidly studied the advantages of the apartment for concealment.

They were many. The room contained five hundred nooks in which a letter could be hidden. The back of every picture and the cover of every book might be made to serve this purpose. There might be a movable tile around the fireplace, or a secret opening in one of the book-cases.

The leg of a chair or table might screw off and reveal a secret chamber. The plush covering of the furniture might have been loosened and the letter thrust beneath it. The carpet might have been lifted and a loose board in the floor removed.

There was evidently far more work ahead of the detective than time to do it in. Yet he went to his task without a moment's hesitation, and with the skill of an expert.

The floor was the first object studied. The carpet was tacked down around its edges. Now,

a tack head gathers a certain nest of dust, which sweeping cannot quite remove. If any of the tacks had been drawn that ancient dust would be disturbed.

Plain eyesight could not be trusted to settle this question. The detective drew from his pocket a pair of strongly magnifying glasses, and adjusted them to his eyes.

"We shall soon see if the carpet has been disturbed."

He went the round of it on hands and knees, his eyes close down to the row of tacks. At the end he rose with a satisfied air.

"That point is settled. Not a tack has been drawn."

It was quite possible, however, that a seam in the carpet had been cut and the floor reached in this way.

Yet a single glance satisfied him on this point. A seam sewed from above could have been seen six feet away.

"The floor is out of the question," he remarked. "Now for the tiles."

These were set in very closely and neatly. The cracks between them were scarcely perceptible. Yet Mr. Sharp well knew that dust will work in where the sharpest knife cannot enter, and his magnifying glasses were again brought into play.

Every line of junction of the tiles was examined, under a power that made it distinctly visible.

"There has been nothing here but the house-maid's brush," he said. "If one of those tiles had been moved its edge would have been wiped clean. Yet I can see no trace of finger marks."

In the same careful way the round of the room was made, the subbase, the backs of the picture-frames, the joiner work of the book-cases, being all studied in the same skillful manner.

The furniture of the room was next investigated, the chairs and tables turned over and thoroughly examined, the coverings of the chairs studied, all with the same expert skill, and with the same negative result.

The detective finally paused in his search, and looked at his watch.

"Two hours gone," he remarked. "I may look for my visitor soon. It is very evident I am to have no walk over. I may have to search the whole house, from roof to cellar floor, in the same fashion. What Julius Martindale hides will not be found on a door-step. I must have this house to myself, and take it to pieces."

There were footsteps in the street that seem-

ed to stop at the door. In a minute afterwards he heard the door open and shut.

"That may be my man," he said to himself.
"I must prepare to receive him."

He unlocked the library door, hastily replaced the furniture which he had disturbed, and seated himself at the table. Taking up a book that lay there he became absorbed in its contents.

Steps were heard in the passage outside. They stopped at the library door, and a voice spoke:

"That will do. My uncle expects me in the library, you say?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well."

The library door opened and the speaker entered.

The detective raised his eyes from his book and surveyed the person before him. He was rather curious to see the man who could play tricks successfully on Julius Martindale.

He saw before him a slender, well-dressed young man, with a youthful face, and a very fresh visage.

His were the rosy cheeks and bright eyes of a youth fresh from the country. He was a handsome young fellow, with a very open counte-

nance. No one would have suspected him of double dealing.

This young gentleman looked at the occupant of the library with an air of surprise.

"Excuse me," he remarked. "I expected to find Mr. Martindale here."

"I will take his place for the present," remarked the detective with a smile. "One moment, please."

He turned back to his book, as if very anxious to finish the passage he was reading. After a minute he laid it down, and deliberately took off and wiped his glasses, which he returned to his pocket.

"But it is Mr. Martindale I want," said the youth impatiently. "As he is not here I will withdraw."

"I must beg a few minutes of your time," remarked the detective, with a great show of politeness. "I believe I am speaking to Mr. Henry Morton?"

"That is my name," answered the youth, seating himself expectantly.

The detective fixed on him a look of bland benevolence.

"You are not a native of Washington, Mr. Morton?"

"I do not claim to be,"

"Have you lived here long?"

The youth, who had been surveying his questioner with an air of doubt and suspicion, assumed a very innocent aspect as he answered:

"About a year and a half. And I cannot say that I am in love with the city."

"You prefer the bloom and freshness of the country."

"I hope you don't look on me as overly fresh," laughed young Morton. "I suppose I am a little innocent: but I am getting my eye-teeth cut."

"Ah! then you have seen something of the elephant."

"A little more than his tail."

Mr. Sharp laughed, as if he enjoyed the joke.

"I see. You are not overly green. Have you many friends in the city?"

"Yes. Quite a number. Club acquaintances and the like."

"This fellow is no fool," said Mr. Sharp to himself. "He is feeling my lead. He will not show his hand until I show mine. Yet there is one point I need to be settled on."

"Excuse me," he remarked. "I feel quite a chilly draught from that open door. As you are the younger man may I request you to close it?"

"Certainly, since I left it open," answered Morton, rising and walking toward the library door.

The eyes of the detective followed him with a keen scenting. A knowing smile marked his face.

"I have him now," he said to himself in triumph. "It is the man of the Casino. I saw his back, and I do not forget easily. Mr. Henry Morton wears that man's shoulders."

The youth returned and took his seat with a placid face. Mr. Sharp looked at him with admiration. He played innocence to perfection—if it was playing. "Have you no other but club acquaintances, Mr. Morton?"

"Oh, yes. Some office friends. I am in an office, you know."

"I see. The gentleman who called on you last night was probably one of them. Mr. Thomas Bruce, I mean."

The youth started sharply at these quietly spoken words, while a sudden pallor overspread his face. With all his command of himself this had been sprung on him too suddenly for his nerves.

"I do not understand you," he hastily exclaimed, in a faltering tone.

"Pardon me. You understand me very well.

I refer to the person with whom you had an interview about ten o'clock last night, in reference to a certain division of spoils of which Mr. Bruce wanted his share."

Morton rose to his feet, and clutched his chair with a tight grip. His face was quite pale, but he suppressed every other sign of emotion, and surveyed the detective with wary eyes.

"If this is all you have to say I think I shall go," he remarked.

"But it is not all I have to say, so perhaps you had better stay."

Mr. Morton seated himself again with a steady countenance. He was evidently a very cool young man.

"I simply wish to recall some interesting facts to your memory," resumed the detective. "I will tell you some of the points of your interview with Tom Bruce, if you will let me speak of him in that familiar way.

"That personage demanded his share of a sum of one hundred and sixty thousand dollars which two *gentlemen of industry* had won at the Casino, by a neat little game of their own devising."

Morton winced at this, but said nothing.

"You offered him his share on condition that he would return certain papers, which you had

lost, and for the loss of which you blamed his light fingers."

A slight gasp came from the youth's lips, but he dug his fingers into the arms of his chair, and forced himself to steadily face the speaker.

"He denied the fact, but you persisted in your accusation," resumed the detective, who read the truth of his remark in the slight change of Morton's expression.

"Then he told you that the papers had been taken from him, but that he was sure to recover them within a few days."

"You are mistaken there. He told me nothing of the kind," cried Morton, forgetting himself in his inward excitement.

Mr. Sharp quietly smiled.

"Very good. Then you admit that I was correct up to that point?"

Morton flushed deeply as he saw the mistake he had made. He had already seen, however, that he was in a trap. Tom Bruce had been nabbed, he fancied, and had made a clean breast of it.

"Those papers are very important. The thief, if caught, will get off cheaply with twenty years in prison. And they have been already missed. Not only that, but Mr. Martindale is aware of the name of the thief."

"Who has told him?" broke out Morton.
"I have."

The young man measured his antagonist with an eye that kept cool and wary despite his danger.

"What do you propose," he asked in a husky tone. "But first, to whom am I speaking?"

"To Frank Sharp, private detective."

"Ah! So *there has* been a trap laid for me! That fellow Bruce is coward as well as villain. What next, Mr. Sharp? Where are those documents?"

"In my possession."

"And what is your price for their return?"

"I first demand one hundred and sixty thousand dollars in lawful currency of the United States, which sum I am employed by Mr. Lindsay to recover."

"And no questions asked?"

"And no questions asked."

"What else?"

"See here, young man. I do not wish you harm. You have wit and courage, and those are qualities I like. But you are completely in my power, and you must do as I say, if you want to escape very serious results. I have some questions to ask you, which must be answered straightly and truly."

"Go on," rejoined Morton, a little huskily. "I have sense enough to know that just now honesty is the best policy."

"What was your object in taking those papers?"

"To gain power over my uncle."

"For what purpose?"

"I have been a little wild. I have debts."

"He would have paid them."

"Not if he knew I had been deceiving him. He would have never forgiven me, for that."

"You wished to force him, then?"

"That was my plan. I knew there was an explosion imminent. I wanted a trump card to play if necessary."

"It was a perilous game, said the detective, shaking his head. "And it seems unnecessary. You have other ways of raising money than through your uncle."

"As a pick-pocket, do you mean?" asked the young man, with a flush of shame. "I hope you will not think so meanly of me. I was brought into that against my will. I did not know Bruce's scheme until he slipped the money into my hand. It was my full intention to return it."

Mr. Sharp smiled quietly. He believed as much as he pleased of this.

"What do you intend to do with me?" asked the youth, with a trembling lip, yet with no other sign of flinching.

The detective fixed his eyes on him. It was evident there was grit and power in the man before him.

"You have played the fool," he remarked. "A man of your ability don't need to steal. It is in you to make your way honestly in the world. I want you to promise me to give up unlawful acts from this moment forward."

"I promise you freely. I have already resolved on that."

"And Washington is not all the world. You must leave this city within an hour, on your way to Canada. I shall keep my eye on you till you hand over the stolen money. But out of it you shall have twenty-five hundred dollars as a start in an honest life. Do you agree to this?"

"What will be done with the papers?"

"Leave that to me. I have other irons in the fire. But, so far as you are concerned, it is the penitentiary or the Dominion of Canada. You have your choice. Which do you take?"

"Montreal."

"Then come with me at once. We must

get through the preliminaries without delay."

They seized their hats and left the library in company.

CHAPTER X.

DETECTIVE SHARP MAKES TWO VISITS.

WE must return to another of our characters, of whom we have lost sight for some time.

This is Mr. Harry Lindsay, the main cause of most of the incidents of our story, and who has been in anything but an easy state of mind since we last saw him.

We find him now in his own apartment, where he is pacing to and fro distractedly. He has flung his smoking-cap fiercely aside, and run his fingers through his hair till it is standing upright on his head.

There is a letter in his hand, which he waves wildly in the air, while exclamations of spite and anger come from his lips.

“Why didn’t I cut off my right hand, before I wrote that confounded epistle?” he cried, fiercely. “Fool and idiot that I was! A peck of trouble caused by ten lines of writing! A fool’s pen is the most dangerous weapon in existence, I’ve found that out.”

Further words were checked by the sound of footsteps, and a hand on the door. Lindsay halted in his hasty movements, and strove to throw off his signs of excitement.

The door opened, and a servant announced : "Mr. Sharp."

The young man gave a slight exclamation as he recognized the detective as his visitor.

"Just the man I want to see," he cried. "Have you good news? The letter? What have you done about the letter?"

"Nothing," was the quiet reply. "I laid my plans, that is all. Something or nothing may come of them. But that is not my business here to-day. You forget that I had another job in hand—the tracking of the thieves who stole your cash."

"A fig for the cash!" cried Lindsay impatiently. "I would give ten times the sum for that letter."

"Yet a hundred and sixty thousand dollars are not to be sneezed at," answered the unmoved detective, as he calmly seated himself, and took a package from his pocket, which he laid on the table.

"Be kind enough to count that," he remarked. "I think you will find the sum correct, less three thousand dollars of wastage and expenses."

Lindsay stared at him in surprise.

"You don't mean to say," he exclaimed, "that you have actually tracked those thieves and recovered the money?"

"I wish I could have recovered the letter as easily. That is a much more difficult job. Pray count the money."

Lindsay looked at him for a moment. Then he jerked impatiently away.

"That can wait," he cried. "I have a letter here that has distracted me. Stay, I will read it to you. Or no, I will tell you its contents. The name of the writer must be kept sacredly secret."

"She has not signed it, I hope."

"No. But her style—her handwriting."

"Very true. These might reveal the identity of Mrs. Gordon."

"Ha! You know? It has come out then? All is lost!" cried Lindsay, with a violent start of dread and astonishment.

"You did not imagine that I would undertake a job of this difficulty in the dark! Don't fear for your secret. It is my business to know before I act."

Lindsay stared at him, as he spoke this in a dry, matter-of-fact tone.

"I see," he exclaimed. "You have tracked Martindale to her house. I might as well have

told you at first. But listen. The affair is growing more urgent. That letter must be recovered without delay if it costs every penny of this money."

He struck his hand violently on the package of U. S. Treasury notes.

"She calls on me almost pitifully to make haste," he continued, running his eye over the letter. "Martindale is showing his hand more fully. You see General Gordon is deep in the secrets of the government. He makes a confidant of his wife, and his papers are in her care. Some of these secrets would be a fortune to a shrewd villain like Martindale, and he is seeking to force them from the fair victim of his schemes."

"Ah, I admire that man," rejoined the detective. "He is no ordinary plotter. His secretaryship, and the control of the government secrets will make him rich and powerful. It is a neatly-laid plot. I admire him."

"I would like to cut his throat," exclaimed Lindsay spitefully.

"I admire him as an able enemy, not as a possible friend," resumed the detective. "It is an honor to deal with an opponent like this, and it will make a man's reputation to defeat him."

"And you hope to defeat him?"

"I expect to," said Mr. Sharp, confidently. "I have not been idle, Mr. Lindsay. Before we are three days older I will have made some highly important moves in our game. What they are must be as secret as Mrs. Gordon's name. Pray count that money."

Thus admonished, Lindsay did so, and announced that the sum was correct.

"Five thousand dollars was the fee I promised you," he remarked. "Is that sufficient?"

"Quite."

"Then here are two thousand more. You may need ready funds in your present task. That leaves me an even hundred and fifty thousand, every cent of which I am ready to spend in this enterprise."

"Money will be needed," remarked the detective. "But wits are more necessary. I have before me a conflict of cunning rather than of cash. What is the hour, sir?"

"Eight o'clock and ten minutes."

"I must see Martindale by nine. Good evening, Mr. Lindsay. I have but one piece of advice to give before I go."

"What is that, sir?"

"That you burn that letter at once."

"You are right. I will do so."

The detective took his departure. He had

correctly expressed his intentions. He made his way at once to Mr. Martindale's house.

It was the hour he had named, nine o'clock, when he was ushered into the presence of the official in the room of their former interview.

"Where have you been!" asked Martindale, impatiently. "I expected to see you after your interview with my nephew."

"You should have returned sooner, then," answered the detective with quiet firmness. "Men in my profession have no spare moments."

"Very well," rejoined Martindale, "What have you done? I should have called on young Morton myself, but deemed it best to await your report."

"It was best. Too many cooks spoil the broth," rejoined the detective. "I have not been idle, Mr. Martindale."

"What have you done?"

"I have learned where those papers are. I can lay my hands on them at will."

"Ha! Then you were right? my nephew was the thief?"

"I accuse no one. I simply affirm that the documents are at my command."

"You have done well, sir," declared Martindale, with a look of deep satisfaction. "If you

say that I am to ask no questions I shall understand it so. Return me the documents and the fee demanded is yours. Trust me to take care that there is no repetition of this offence."

He closed his lips firmly. It was evident that no thief would find the records of the State Department easy plunder again.

"I have changed my mind," said Mr. Sharp quietly. "I no longer demand the ten thousand dollar fee promised."

"Ah! But you are not working for amusement?"

"Not at all. The documents are yours, in exchange for an equivalent."

"Name your equivalent," demanded Mr. Martindale, with some show of curiosity.

"It is a certain letter, the property of Mrs. Lucile Gordon, wife of General George Gordon, which letter is now in the hands of Mr. Julius Martindale."

"Ha!" cried the secretary with a start of surprise. "So lies the wind, eh? I fancied so, by Jove!" He broke into a short grim laugh. "I judged you were beating around that bush."

"Do you agree?" asked the detective.

"I deny knowledge of any such letter," answered Mr. Martindale, with grim decision.

"So, Mr. Frank Sharp, that is the cat you had

in your bag eh? I renew my offer of the ten thousand dollars."

"I decline the offer."

"That is for you to decide," was the reply. "I shall not force the money on you. Understand, once for all, that I deny knowledge of any such letter."

"Then there is nothing further to be said," remarked the detective, rising and taking his hat.

"There is nothing further to be said. If you prefer to make the robbery public, very well. The thief will be ruined and I may be censured. That is all."

"Not quite all, Mr. Martindale," said the detective, looking the astute official meaningly in the eye.

Martindale bore his look without a change of countenance. Evidently he had taken his course. He meant what he had said.

"Good evening, sir," said the detective.

"Good evening," was the firm reply.

Mr. Sharp left the room.

Two minutes afterwards found him in the street. He had not gone ten paces from the house ere he gave a signal, at sound of which two men sprang from the shadows of the adjoining houses.

Some rapid words were exchanged. Then the dark forms sank back again into the shadows, and Mr. Sharp passed on.

"It is war to the knife now," he muttered. "He intends to try his worthy nephew. I fancy he will find that I have been before him there. We shall see who can play his cards best, politician or detective."

Ten minutes afterwards Mr. Martindale emerged from his house. He looked around him with his habitual wariness before leaving the step. Then he started forward at a brisk pace in the direction of Leffingwell Terrace.

The walk before him was a long one, but he strode onward with the firm, free tread of a man in robust health, and with a fixed object in view.

His route lay through a number of streets, some of them well tenanted, others nearly deserted.

One of the latter was a narrow avenue between some large warehouses, which formed a short cut in the direction of his journey.

The place seemed quite deserted. Yet Martindale had not half traversed it ere the sound of a whistle came to his ears, and two men started out from the shadows of a deep doorway directly before him.

Simultaneously two other men appeared in his rear.

"Stand and deliver!" cried one of them harshly. "And not a word or a whimper if you don't want to be throttled."

The next instant the men had closed on him, and he was a prisoner in four pairs of strong arms.

Martindale's first impulse was to struggle and to give an alarm. But he repressed this intention, and calmly asked them :

"Well. You have me. What do you want with me?"

"Jist to 'vestigate your pockets. An' you'll keep mum if you're wise."

Martindale was wise enough to know this, and he stood without moving a muscle while his assailants proceeded rapidly to search him.

They were evidently experts at the business ; and their search was most thorough. Not an inch of his clothing but was examined.

Finally, taking his purse and watch as the only valuables found on him, they released him, and suffered him to proceed.

He had not taken three steps, however before his assailants vanished.

A knowing smile came to Martindale's lips as he walked steadily on.

"So, war is declared between Frank Sharp and me," he said to himself. "The letter is not on my person. That is settled. Then my house comes next in the line of search. Will they find it? I doubt their ability."

Ten minutes more brought him to the house in Leffingwell Terrace, in which his nephew resided.

"Mr. Morton?" remarked the servant, in reply to his inquiry. "Why, he is no longer here, sir. He left six hours ago, and took the train to Charleston. He is going to Cuba, sir."

The sound that came from Martindale's lips was almost an oath. He stared at the servant for a moment, and then turned sharp on his heel and left the steps.

An hour afterwards found him at the Baltimore and Potomac depot. Some well put questions satisfied him in regard to what he wished to know.

"As I suspected, he said. "The Charleston trip is a lure. He is off for Canada. I must run him down at once. We shall see, my fine youth, whether you are more than a match for your uncle."

A train was about to pull out. Hastily buying a ticket, Martindale jumped on board.

Of two persons who had observed his move-

ments at a distance, one quickly entered the smoking car on the train. The other stood watching it as it drew out from the station.

He then hastened away, directing his footsteps towards the office of Frank Sharp, detective.

Evidently the game laid by that personage was in full play.

CHAPTER XI.

SLIPPERY JOE CORRALED. A POLICE SEARCH.

WHILE Julius Martindale was off in full chase of his runaway nephew, Frank Sharp, the detective, had made his way back towards his office, very well satisfied with the state of affairs.

He entered with a quiet step, that failed to rouse an echo in the solid old building.

Jake, the police spy, was still on guard, and a dozen words between the two sufficed to put the detective in full information.

"I hope to have other fish in the pan before the night is over," remarked the detective. "And I shall want your help. As for Slippery Joe, he can be left to carry out his scheme. I have found out what he is after, and I hardly think he will get it."

He touched his fingers to his breast pocket, with a significant smile.

"But you have other important papers here. He might get into some valuable secrets."

"That is so. It may be best to call on the gentleman, and give him his walking ticket."

"Hist!" warned Jake. "Do you hear that? There seems to be something in the wind."

What he referred to was a faint sound from the corridor, that seemed like the stealthy opening of a door.

They sunk into silence, and waited.

After a minute a faint, shuffling noise came to their ears. It seemed just at the door of the office. Silence followed, that lasted for several minutes.

Then the shuffling sound was faintly audible again, and was followed by a slight scratching noise on the door.

Inside the room all was still as death. Not a breath could have been heard.

The scratching sound lasted but a minute, and was succeeded by the metallic creak of a lock. The next moment the door was pushed cautiously open.

Slippery Joe's method was now evident. He had obtained an impression of the lock and had a duplicate key made. The fellow was evidently an old hand.

Inside the room blank darkness prevailed. The tenants had extinguished their light and concealed themselves.

Joe's first step was to strike a match, and light a candle which he carried.

He looked around the room. No one was visible.

"The coast's clear," he muttered with satisfaction. "Guess I'll shet out all stragglers."

He closed and locked the door.

"Now 'bout them papers. An' quick as greased lightnin', kase there's no tellin' when that sly coon of a Little Joker might pop in, and that wouldn't be noways comftable."

Without a moment's hesitation he proceeded to the desk of the detective, opened it, and coolly seated himself, while he pulled a thick bunch of papers from a pigeon hole.

This he untied, and began a rapid examination of its contents, opening and reading the heading of each paper.

This proceeded for some time.

"Wonder what he's done with them dokyments," queried Joe in dissatisfaction. "Ther' here somewhere, but I s'pose I'll have to go through the whole caboodle 'fore I light down on 'em. And time's sorter pressin'. The Joker mought ha' laid 'em out more handy like."

He laughed at his own wit, as he continued his rapid scrutiny. One paper at length arrested his attention.

"Hello!" he cried, "Here's beans and punkins. Somethin' 'bout Tom Bruce, sure as shootin'. Reckon I'll rake that in, Tom mought like to 'spect it."

He was on the point of thrusting the paper in his pocket, when a voice at his ear caused him to hastily drop it, and start as if he had been shot.

"I wouldn't, if I were you," spoke the voice.

Joe wormed sharply round, but all he saw was a hand holding a revolver, that nearly touched his right ear.

He twisted nervously round in the other direction, only to see another hand, with another revolver, within an inch of his left ear.

He turned back again, clapped both hands over his ears, and bent forward till his nose touched the desk.

"I cave!" he said.

His next movement was to hold up his arms, with the wrists close together.

"Slip on the darbies," he continued. "The jig's up. The Joker wins. Jist prominade me down to a Cheap John's, and sell me for what I'll fetch. I reckon I won't rake in no high bids jist now."

"Get up," spoke a stern voice.

Joe obediently did so. He glanced sheepishly around at the two armed men behind him.

"Did you ever hear of the goose going to the fox's hole for snacks?" asked the detective, with a grim smile.

"Won't somebody kick me for a blamed fool?" answered Joe. "If I'd had as much common sense as a blind jackass I'd never ha' bucked agin the Joker. S'pose I'm in for a slip behind the gridiron."

They were interrupted at this moment by foot-steps in the passage. They were quickly succeeded by the entrance of a person to the room. He paused in surprise at the tableau before him.

The detective turned towards this new comer, led him out to the hall, and spoke with him for a few minutes in low tones.

"Your search was thorough?"

"Yes. He has no such paper about him."

"And he took the train for New York?"

"He did. With Bill Plum as lookout."

"Then we must get to work at once."

"What's up here, Mr. Sharp?"

"This fellow? Oh, he's a candidate for Salt Creek. It's lucky for him that I have more important work in hand just now. See here, Slippery Joe."

The crouching villain turned hastily towards the speaker.

"I'm going to let you slip this time. But bear in mind that I've got a rope on your neck. If you try any more ugly tricks, back you come on a run. And you can put the same spice in Tom Bruce's hash."

"I'm goin' to be an honest man," whimpered Joe. "You're a gentleman, Mr. Sharp, and I'll never forgit yer kindness."

"You lie, you beat. You'd steal a beggar's bone to-morrow for an ounce of meat. Get now. And mind your eye. If you drop into my clutches again, up you go. And don't forget it."

"Reckon I won't mighty soon."

Joe was off like a streak of lightning. He was not going to take chances on the Joker's changing his mind.

"And now, lads, for the other job," remarked the detective. "Bring up the men, and be at the place appointed within an hour. I will be there in advance."

An hour afterwards found Frank Sharp, Jake, and the men sent for, inside Julius Martindale's house. How they had entered it was one of the secrets known only to the police. It will suffice to say that a dozen men were within the

mansion, yet its servants slept on, without the slightest hint of anything amiss.

They slept, it is true, in the upper chambers of the dwelling, while the police agents were gathered below.

"Now, men, to work," commanded the detective. "You know your tasks. The search must be thorough. The letter can be hidden in a crack that a fly could not enter. To work. Let nothing escape you."

The force was divided up between several rooms, and went to their task with the caution, silence, and skill of thoroughly trained experts.

Scarcely a sound that would have wakened a fly came from their operations. Yet the rooms that had been given to their hands were explored with a care and minuteness that no band of skilled mechanics could have surpassed.

No surface search satisfied Frank Sharp. The more complicated pieces of furniture were taken to pieces.

The men were provided with every tool of cabinet-maker and upholsterer. But their art was superior to that of any mechanic. It was a noiseless art. Their work was performed almost without a sound.

For the whole night the process continued, the detective acting as overseer, going from

room to room, directing and watching every movement, and keenly studying out every possible hiding-place.

Before morning the search of the library, which he had begun, was completed, and of every other room on the same floor.

Yet the hidden letter remained undiscovered. No trace of it had been found, though every possible hiding-place in the rooms examined had been opened, or probed with skillfully devised tools.

Yet when the servants of the mansion awoke in the morning, and opened the various rooms to the daylight, not a trace of disturbance was visible.

Every article of furniture sat in its usual place. Objects which had been completely taken to pieces were whole and sound again, without a pin scratch to mark the secret operations. Not a particle of dirt or litter was visible. No one could have dreamed of the events which had taken place in those rooms during the night.

The domestics went to their daily labors in happy ignorance, without a shadow of suspicion of anything out of the ordinary.

That morning a telegram was delivered at an early hour into Frank Sharp's hands,

"Jersey City, 5 o'clock, A. M.—The chase is off for Canada. J. M. is booked for the early boat. I travel by the same. Next word from Albany." W. P."

"That clears the coast for another night," said the detective with satisfaction. "If he nabs Morton then I'm no judge of human nature. That young man needs no lessons in cunning."

That night was a copy of the preceding one. The search was now on the first floor, which was investigated as thoroughly as the second floor had been. And with the same result. The letter remained undiscovered.

While this process was in operation a series of telegrams kept the detective fully advised of every step of the chase.

It had gone on from Albany to Montreal, and from Montreal towards Detroit. The keen-witted pursuer had so far traced the route of the fugitive, but had not been able to overtake him.

But he is up to business. He has got out a warrant of arrest in Montreal, and telegraphed an order of detention to a station on the route. The runaway's game is up, unless he is very sharp.

But that just hit the truth on the nail. The

runaway was very sharp. And this the next telegram proved.

"Nephew has given uncle the slip. Passed the search in disguise, or left the train by the way. Has vanished, and J. M. is off his eggs."

All this gave the detective the opportunity he had desired. The investigation of the house went on, night after night. To gain chance to study the servants' rooms the latter were invited to a feast and frolic by an acquaintance who was in police pay.

This jollification was kept up to a late hour of the night, the merry roisterers not dreaming that a dozen men were in their rooms, turning over their valuables, and making a thorough study of the apartments.

When the hint was given to break up the party, the house was empty. The search had been completed.

Yet no trace of the letter was found.

Frank Sharp sat in his office the next day annoyed and out of spirits. With his head on his hand he sat long in moody silence. Then he broke out into somewhat spiteful speech.

"He has beaten me. The letter is not on his person, nor in his house. Yet it cannot be

far away. Where is it? that is the question. I see no hope but in the other scheme. If well played that may be successful. Meanwhile Martindale must be kept strictly under shadow. He may lead the way to his hiding-place though I have little hope of it."

His reverie was interrupted by the entrance of another telegram, which read :

"Chase ended. J. M. gives it up. Is on his return. Look for him."

"Let him come. I want him on the ground now. There must be an entire change of plan."

CHAPTER XII.

A HUNTING EXCURSION.

KEEN as Julius Martindale was, his young nephew had succeeded in eluding him; but then, as Mrs. Gordon had once remarked to Harry Lindsay, the person who is hiding always has the advantage of him who is seeking, and besides there is no genius so rich in expedients as the genius of fear. Be that as it may, Henry Morton escaped his pursuer, and at Detroit the pursuit was abandoned. But it is an incontrovertible truth that if anything disappears from one locality it is sure to appear in another; and if Mr. Martindale had not chosen to abandon his pursuit, it is not unlikely that he would eventually have found his man. Anyway his nephew did not succeed in utterly annihilating himself, as we shall presently see.

Will Benton was a young man who, under an exterior which, it must be confessed, bore a not distant likeness to what is known in vulgar

parlance as a "dude," carried a headpiece which was available when a headpiece was required; and in this case he was deeply and generously interested. So, after doing a certain amount of independent thinking and arranging, he one day visited Lindsay, and announced his intention of taking a couple of weeks off for a "hunting trip" to the west.

Harry was rather surprised at this determination, but being piqued that his best friend should thus abandon him in his trouble, did what most men would do under similar circumstances,—said a dignified good-bye, and the moment his friend's back was turned commended him to the care of a very, very evil Royal Personage, who wears a tail, hoofs and horns, on full-dress occasions.

Will bought a ticket direct to Detroit; and the third morning after leaving the Union Depot in Washington, landed in Chicago, sure that he was on the right scent. He wasted no time after his arrival, but consulted the directory at once and in less than half an hour after stepping out of the Michigan Central sleeper stood before a certain tall building on La Salle Street, the front of which bears in large letters the sign of Pinkerton's Detective Agency, over the suggestive picture of an open eye, and the motto,

"We never sleep." A few minutes later found him closeted with a man at the mention of whose name criminals from the Golden Gate to the "Tip End of Yankee Land" were wont to tremble.

"Well, sir?" said this gentleman, with a business-like air which said more plainly than words, "let us come to the point—what can I do for you?"

"I want to engage you to find a young man for me," answered Benton.

"Is he in Chicago?" inquired the great detective.

"That is exactly what I want to know," Will replied; and then he related the story, omitting, however, all mention of Morton's crime, and leaving the detective under the impression that he merely wanted an interview with the fugitive for personal reasons. When he had finished, the prince of detectives asked for a description, in answering which request Will handed him the photograph, which he supplemented with the details of complexion, height, manner, walk, etc., so far as he knew them.

"That will do," said the detective finally, "if he is in the city, we will find him for you. I do not think we shall require more than three days, though probably one will suffice."

"I hope so," Will returned, taking his hat and preparing to leave; "for time is exceedingly precious in this case. I will leave my card, and if you find my young friend, please have your agent simply locate him for me without giving him any suspicion that he is being shadowed, and communicate with me immediately at the Palmer House, where I will register under the name of 'Chas. L. Jones, Toronto.'"

The detective smiled approvingly as he wrote the fictitious name and the hotel on Benton's card, and bade his young client good-morning.

"So far so good," mused Will, to himself, as he emerged from the Detective Agency into the smoky sunshine on La Salle Street; "now for some breakfast, a good cigar and a little snooze. But hold on!" he exclaimed, stopping suddenly, as a thought struck him. "Suppose I should stumble up against the young cub somewhere, and he should recognize me! By Jove, that's an idea! Why, he'd skip out like a flea, sure as a gun."

Will stopped at the corner of Monroe Street and stroked his very correctly cut English beard with great affection. Finally he murmured with a sigh of comical desperation—

"Well, what must be, must; so off you go, my lordly mop." And fearing lest his will should

weaken, he hurried up to the tonsorial palace in the Palmer House, famous among gods and men, and within twenty minutes stepped forth, as verily "translated" as was Bully Bottom after he got the ass's head affixed to his shoulders. His most intimate friends would not have known him, so great was the transformation.

"Now, then," he muttered, surveying himself in the glass with mingled satisfaction and regret; "now, then, for a mutton chop, coffee *et al.*" And passing through the barber's shop into the hotel rotunda, he walked to the desk and signed in a bold hand his fictitious name and address.

"Breakfast, sir?" inquired the courteous clerk.

"If you please," Will replied, affecting a slight English drawl.

"Will you be shown to your room first, sir?" asked the clerk, as he held his hand over the call bell.

"Oh, no, thank you. I'm just off the sleeping coach, don't you know, and deucedly hungry."

"Ting," went the bell, and "Front" called the clerk; and then, when the call boy answered the summons,—"Show the gentleman to the breakfast room!"

Being ravenously hungry, Will despatched quite a respectable breakfast; and after finishing,

strolled down to the billiard-room to have a smoke and a look around.

His customary nicotianic diet was confined to cigarettes, but on special occasions, like the present, he allowed himself the more serious indulgence of a fine Havana "weed."

He had scarcely been seated a minute ere he noticed, nearly opposite him, a strangely familiar face. The owner of this face was a very young man, not very long past the age when the male citizen ceases to be an infant in law, and secures the proud privilege of casting his first vote, and aiding to shape the destinies of his nation. The face itself was smooth, frank, with a bloom that must have been the envy of his lady acquaintances.

As Will studied his *vis-a-vis*, gradually there dawned upon his mind a wondering suspicion, which gradually ripened into an amazed conviction, that this interesting face and the body pertaining thereto were none other than the face and person of Henry Morton, the fugitive after whom he had come to Chicago.

When this certainty unfolded itself in Will's mind, he gave vent to a suppressed ejaculation:—

"Well, I'm d—d!" (He was not more choice than the average young man in his private language). "Now," he reflected, "I wonder if he has

noticed my scrutiny. I don't believe he has, and it will be safe for me to go to the clerk's desk and send a message to Mr. Pinkerton."

He waited a few minutes, smoking indolently, then rose, and with an aimless air, strolled back into the rotunda. Then it took but a moment for him to scribble a few lines—

"I've run my game to earth in the hotel. Send some one to hang around handy. I'm going to work him myself, but may need help.

"CHAS. L. JONES,

"Toronto."

This note he saw despatched by a messenger, and then strolled back to the billiard-room.

What was his chagrin and amazement on entering the room, to see at a glance that the bird had flown!

We have noted, ere this, that Henry Morton was an uncommonly shrewd young man; and it is not likely that under the circumstances which hastened his flight from Washington, he should so soon relax his vigilance. The truth is, that the one idea constantly uppermost in his mind, was, "I may be caught; I must be cautious and regard every man as a possible pursuer." So when his nervous vigilance caught

the eyes of Will Benton studying his face, though he betrayed no sign, he watched his chance, and the moment the other's back was turned, hurriedly left the room.

Finding himself directly upon Wabash Avenue, he turned northward, walking rapidly and soliloquizing as he went.

"Well, I'm a sweet-scented idiot, that's a fact! a baby ought to have known better than to loaf around in such a public place. I wonder who he was. Don't believe I've ever seen him, but then—Oh, pshaw! He didn't know me from Adam; but it was, or might have been a close shave. I guess, young man, it'll be a healthier plan for you to go home and lie low," and so saying he hastened his steps, turning east on Water Street, and then north again, across the Rush Street bridge.

Finally, after about twenty minutes' smart tramping, he turned west on Washington Place, then again north on Dearborn Avenue, and ran up the steps of a beautiful mansion on the south east corner of that aristocratic street and Walton Place. Opening the door with a private latch-key, he stepped quickly into the hall-way, and then for the first time breathed freely, with a feeling of security.

A few minutes later, a venerable old gentle-

man, apparently out for a leisurely "constitutional," passed the house, and without seeming to notice it, took in, at one swift sidewise glance, location, number and details of the building, with such minuteness, that on the witness stand he could have sworn even to the shape of the bell pull and the number of steps leading up to the door. Then, without pausing in his deliberate pace, he turned across the avenue and seating himself under one of the magnificent trees in Washington Square, drew a *Tribune* from his pocket, adjusted his spectacles, and set himself leisurely to read the morning's news.

We do not believe that a single one of our readers, had he chanced to pass that way, would have given a second glance at the respectable gentleman, reading his paper in the square, or that any one would have imagined him other than he seemed; yet under that unobtrusive exterior was concealed the person of one of Pinkerton's shrewdest detectives, familiarly known as "Daddy Slick," though in the bosom of his family and on the rolls of the city register, he bore the more dignified title, "Charles B. La claire." Nor did he spend his moments in reading. Though his eyes were fixed upon the paper in his hands, his mind schemed rapidly on another subject; and presently, having

worked out the problem to his satisfaction, he quietly put his glasses into their case, folded his paper, and walking to the corner of Washington Place and Clark Street, hailed and boarded a south-bound car.

An hour later there was a ring at the door-bell of number 319 Dearborn Avenue; and the servant answering the ring, found on the step a young man, who with a very business-like air, said, "Special school census. Please give me the names of the residents."

"Phat's thim?" inquired Bridget, astounded.

"The names of the people that live in the house," explained the visitor rapidly, as he dipped his pen into a little ink bottle that he carried in his vest pocket, and opened a little book of long narrow blank slips, in which he prepared to write.

"Oh, the names, is it?" commented the cautious Bridget. "And phat is it yez do be wantin' them for, at all?"

"For the school census, I tell you."

"Och, is it the childer yez mane? Well, there does be divil a wan," and she prepared to close the door.

"No, no; not the children: every man, woman and child in the house, I want the name of—including the pretty second girl," he added,

glancing at her sidewise, with a flattering smile.

"Och, go 'long wid yer blarney," answered Bridget, giggling and relenting; "is it the names of ivery wan yez want?"

"Every one, my dear. Now, to begin with the prettiest; what's your own name, for instance?"

"Go 'long, wid ye! Phat good wad it do yez to know me name? Well thin, its Bridget O'Connell."

"And a good name it is, too," said the census-taker proceeding to write it down on one of his slips. "It's the name of the noblest patriot Ireland ever had."

"Sure, yez don't be writin' it down!" exclaimed the delighted Bridget, looking with curiosity over his shoulder.

"Of course I am; and it's going into a book, 'Bridget O'Connell, age twenty, (you can't be a day older;) residence, 319 Dearborn Avenue.' Now for the rest. Begin with the master of the house."

And then Bridget, ticking them off on her fingers, as if saying her rosary, named one after the other, all the inmates of this fashionable boarding house.

The census-taker wrote them down in succession.

"Is that all, now?" he inquired, as Bridget came to the end.

"Yis; ivery blissed wan;—the saints forgive me! but I've clane lift out the new boarder; and him a comin' only, it was the day before yesterday."

"The new boarder, Bridget? And what's his name?"

"Och, and don't I be a fergettin' that same! But it's a quare wan: Martin—Martingall—Martingale! I think that's it—Martindale; yis, sorr; that's the gintleman's name, sure!"

"Martindale?" exclaimed the census-taker, in tones expressive of intense astonishment. "I used to know a young fellow of that name, at school. What does he look like?"

And thereupon, Bridget described, with tolerable accuracy, our young friend Morton.

"Oh, no!" exclaimed the listener, with disappointment evident in every tone, it must be another Martindale. My friend was very dark complexioned, and over six feet high when I met him last; well, good-bye, Bridget, my dear, and thank you very kindly," and the young man slyly squeezed the servant girl's hand.

"Good-bye, sorr," she returned, looking after him till he disappeared around the corner; and then she added *sotto-voce*, "Oh, but ain't he the

ilegant gintleman! wid eyes like a banshee an' sich a beautiful whishker.

But if, two minutes later, she could have met her "ilegant gintleman," she would scarcely have recognized him; for the "beautiful whishker" had been transferred from his chin to his pocket.

CHAPTER XIII.

"THE WICKED STAND ON SLIPPERY PLACES."

IMMEDIATELY after Will Benton had left the Pinkerton agency that morning, the chief rang a bell upon his desk, and when the messenger responded, asked without looking up from the instructions he was writing,—

"Is the Frenchman in the office?"

"Just come in, sir," the boy replied.

"Send him to me," said the chief. And a few seconds later, a bright-looking fellow, some thirty years of age, made his appearance.

"Good morning, Mr. Pinkerton. You sent for me?" he asked.

"Yes, Laclare; I have something right in your line. What are you on now?"

"The Van Clump bank case; but I can't do anything further on that till Riley makes his report."

"Very well; then you can go on this case at once. It ought not to take you very long. Here

are your instructions ; this is the photograph ; and you can report to me personally when you get hold of anything. Sit down there and read the instructions ; and if there's anything else you want to know, ask me about it."

The young detective ran his eye over the instructions, scanned the photograph and concluded that nothing further would be required.

Fifteen minutes later, he emerged into the street from the rear door of the building ; the very incarnation of a reputable citizen, past the meridian of life, but excellently preserved.

"First, let us try the hotels," said he to himself. "He is well fixed for cash, and would be likely to hang out at one of the best, if any. I'll take them as they come ; and first for the Grand Pacific. I don't suppose he'd register under his own name, but we might try the books, and take a look into the billiard rooms and bars as we pass."

A stroll through the great hotel opposite the Post-Office proved fruitless ; but the instant he entered the billiard-room to the Palmer House, he saw that his hunt was ended.

He never even glanced towards his man, after catching the first glimpse ; but nevertheless, he noted every move and every expression.

"Something worrying him," he reflected; and a moment after, he noted the cause. "Soho! another spotter on his track, eh? Well, but you are a blooming idiot, my boy!" as Benton strolled into the rotunda, "any fool might know he'd get away from you. Aha! I thought as much," he continued, when Morton rose to leave the room. "Now I suppose I might as well take a hand." And though Morton was utterly unconscious of espial, the respectable old settler kept him in sight until the moment he entered his boarding house on Dearborn Avenue; and some time later, in the guise of a census-taker, as we have seen learned his *alias* and the date of his arrival.

Meanwhile, Benton, terribly chagrined at being so easily outwitted, followed his note in person to Mr. Pinkerton's office; and there explained, with much cursing of his stupidity, the episode.

"You had him under your thumb, sure enough," said the detective; "but why didn't you address him at once, without waiting to send me word?"

"Why, the truth is," Will replied, "I want to get some information, which he may not care to give, and thought it best to have handy the means of terrifying him, should he prove balky."

" You should have explained all that in the beginning," said the detective gravely. " I might have saved you some trouble. But now, the best thing you can do is to make a clean breast of the matter; and then we'll be able to work to better purpose."

Whereupon Will detailed Morton's history from the beginning, and explained the use to be made of him.

"I think," said the detective, as Will was leaving him for the second time that morning, "you shall hear from me before the day is over. Our best man is on the job." And as soon as Will had left the room, he sent word to the outer office that Laclaire should be sent in the moment he arrived and that he should be sent back to the office for additional orders by any of the force who might happen to run across him.

But when "Daddy Slick" reported, he had already fulfilled his commission; and was sent immediately to report *in propria persona* to "Mr. Charles L. Jones, Toronto," at the Palmer House.

"It is my opinion," said the young detective, on completing his report to Mr. Benton, in the latter's private room, "that you can take your time about visiting your friend; as

you so thoroughly terrified him that he will be likely to keep close during the next twenty-four hours."

"No time like now," Will exclaimed. "It was just pure luck that you happened to be around when I started him off this morning, and I don't want to lose him again. Are you at liberty?"

"Certainly, sir, and at your service."

"Then let us drive out to the young gentleman at once, and get through with the business. If I'm lucky I may be able to start for Washington to-night."

Soon after they were rattling out Rush street towards Walton Place, where they alighted, telling the driver to await their return. Then walking around the square to No. 319 Dearborn Avenue, they rang the bell.

Bridget, who once more answered the ring detected in Mr. Laclaire's features no resemblance to the census-taker who had so thoroughly won her fancy a few hours since; and when Will inquired "Is Mr. Martindale at home?" answered "yis sorr," and asked the gentlemen to step into the parlor.

"Oh, that's not necessary. I'm an old acquaintance from his home, and I want to surprise him. Can't you show us up to his room, without saying anything?"

Sure!" exclaimed the girl, quick to catch, in her Irish way, the pleasant side of a trick like this—"jist stip this way, gentlemen, an' I'll show yez till the dure." And as she preceded them upstairs to the second hall, she sang the praises of the "ilegant an' foine-mannered young gintleman" in no stinted terms. Finally she left them at the door of Morton's room.

After a hurried conversation, carried on in whispers, it was decided that Will should enter first, and cough loudly if he required assistance from Laclaire.

Benton knocked at the door.

"Come in," sung out a clear voice from within, and one instant later, Henry Morton would have given one thousand dollars to have been away from home at that particular moment; for, in Will Benton he recognized the person whose scrutiny had so startled him that morning. This seemed a confirmation of his worst surmises; for he made not the slightest question that Benton must be a detective in his uncle's employ.

However, it would have taken a quick eye to notice his involuntary start; for in a second he was as calm and unsuspicious in his reception as if he had thought Will only an ordinary business caller.

The latter went straight to his point; "Mr. Martindale, I believe."

"Yes, that is my name. To what do I owe the honor of this visit?"

"You must kindly excuse my intrusion," said Will, "but I have come from Washington to ask a very important favor at your hands. You have lived in Washington yourself, I believe, Mr. Martindale?"

"No, sir," coolly answered the other, "you are mistaken; I never was in the city. However, in what way can I serve you?"

"We might as well talk plainly," said Will, seeing that he should have a difficult task; "I know perfectly who you are, and but that I have lost my beard you would have recognized me. My name is Benton—U. S. Treasury department, and you are Henry C. Morton, lately connected with the State department. I came—"

Morton interrupted him with a marvellously counterfeited laugh; "I see; it is a plain case of mistaken identity. As you suggested a moment since, my name is Martindale, and as I informed you, I have never seen Washington—"

"Hold on, sir," cried Benton, beginning to lose his temper, "I'm not in a mood to be trifled with. I came here to find you, and I have

succeeded, even though you are masquerading under your uncle's name. I came also to obtain some information from you; and by the Lord Harry, I'm going to get it,—or you! Now, do you understand me, Mr. Morton?"

Morton remained perfectly cool and collected, and when Benton finished, merely answered,— "As I have before remarked, sir, it is a case of mistaken identity; and, sir, as you have, of course, no business with me under the circumstances, I must ask you to leave, and remind you that any longer stay will be trespass."

"Then you persist in your masquerade?" inquired Benton, threateningly.

Morton smiled as if compassionating the other's perverse stupidity.

"Very well," the latter exclaimed, "let us see." He gave the preconcerted signal, and Laclaire entered.

"This, Mr. Morton, is Mr. Laclaire, one of Mr. Pinkerton's employes. You may have heard of Mr. Pinkerton? Ah! Well, gentlemen, now that we are acquainted, it may be well to proceed to business. Mr. Laclaire, will you kindly read to Mr. Morton the document you have in your right hand breast pocket. It may interest him."

Then Will smilingly leaned back in his chair

while the detective read a warrant for the arrest of Henry C. Morton *alias* Martindale."

When it was finished, the young culprit, cool as ever, still insisted that it was a case of mistaken identity. "Though," he added, "I admit it is a very curious coincidence that this Merton—is that the name? Oh, yes, Morton!—this Morton should have happened on my name for an *alias*; very remarkable indeed."

And when shown his own photograph he would merely admit that the case became more and more curiously complicated.

So cool and determined was he, that he suffered himself to be arrested and taken voluntarily to the agency for examination, rather than admit anything.

But when he fell into the hands of the Great Detective himself, it was a different affair. It required but a few moments under those terribly searching eyes, and that penetrative voice quietly promising to send to Washington for Julius Martindale, and to hold the prisoner pending his arrival, to make the young scamp squirm uneasily and inquire what was wanted of him. Then Benton plied his questions, and was soon convinced that he had come on a wild-goose chase; for Morton, having been once convinced that no harm was intended him, answered freely

and honestly. But he knew nothing of the stolen letter; and Benton set out for Washington on the evening train, thoroughly beaten.

Meanwhile, however, the agency had gained another detective; for the chief, admiring the coolness and mettle of the youngster, made a proposition, in which he saw opportunities for safety from pursuit, and employment suited to his genius; and to-day there is not among Chicago's many expert detectives a cooler or cleverer than he who once bore the name of Morton.

CHAPTER XIV.

MRS. GORDON'S ENTERPRISE.

ON the deck of a Potomac steamboat sat Harry Lindsay. They were running down stream towards Alexandria. Green fields and reedy flats lay on either hand, and the crowded and smoke-veiled city lay behind.

With his eyes fixed on the gliding banks, Lindsay sat in a half moody, half hopeful frame. He was not there without a purpose, but was out of spirits at the ill success of the search for his unfortunate letter.

From time to time he looked around among the passengers, as if expecting to see a familiar face. Yet on each occasion he turned back with a disappointed expression.

"It looks as if I had been played with," he muttered. "This journey is a sort of wild-goose chase."

At that moment he was approached by a woman dressed like a merchant's wife on a

holiday. She held a lunch basket on her arm while a vail partly concealed her features.

"I hope you may catch your wild-goose," she said, laughingly.

Lindsay started violently at the sound of the voice, sprang to his feet and looked eagerly towards her. Then he caught her hand in a strong grasp.

"I hardly dared hope you were in earnest," he cried. "Come with me, I have a cage for my goose. I was in a dreadful way when you did not come."

"Not quite ready to jump into the slimy river, were you?" asked the woman, with a laugh.

"Maybe I would have thought twice about it," he responded gayly.

He led the way to the lower deck of the boat, and then to a small private room in the rear.

"I have hired the captain's office," he said. "We are alone here, without danger of interruption."

"I dared not come to your house again, and was forced to make this appointment," she said, as she threw up her vail.

There was revealed the beautiful face of Mrs. Gordon.

"Anywhere!" he cried. "Anywhere that I

can meet you! You have made me supremely happy, Lucile."

He caught her hand and pressed it in rapture to his lips.

She suffered it to lie in his grasp for a minute, while her eyes grew soft and tender as they rested upon his.

Then she withdrew her hand, while her face grew troubled.

"There is enough of this," she cried hastily. "You have no right to speak so, and I have no right to listen."

"Love has its rights, as well as duty," he murmured.

"Hush, sir." She blushed deeply. "If there is more of this I must return to the deck. The letter! Where is the letter? That is my object. Have you recovered that dangerous epistle which you were mad enough to write and I was mad enough to read?"

"No, Lucile. Unfortunately, no. I have employed the most skillful of the Washington detectives, and bade him use every means, without regard to expense. He has made a most thorough search of Martindale's house and person. But it has proved fruitless. No trace of the letter has been found.

"It must be found!" she cried passionately,

wringing her hands with a distressed air. "I am ruined if it is not. Martindale's demands are growing more severe and insolent. I must reveal to him secrets that were given me in the strictest confidence by General Gordon. I am on the brink of ruin on every side." "Why not defy him? He will not dare expose his perfidy."

"You do not know him," she replied distractedly. "He is capable of anything. If I refuse him that letter will be in General Gordon's hands within three hours. He is a man without conscience or mercy."

"Then let him give it to General Gordon. I will bear whatever consequence flows from it."

"You talk wildly," she exclaimed, her eyes fixed on him in terror. "General Gordon would kill you without mercy. As for me, my reputation would be ruined. And that is not all. Your death, Harry—"

Her eyes told the rest.

The enraptured lover caught her in his arms, and would have pressed his lips to hers, but she broke in terror from his embrace.

"No, no!" she cried. "If I loved you a thousand fold, I cannot and will not forget my duty to my husband. No more of this." She sank on a seat with a distracted air.

"Forgive me, Lucile. I will not offend again."

"I have not told you all," she resumed. "It is not only State secrets that Martindale demands. The villain goes further. He professes a passion for me. He has dared to make love to me. The snake! The very touch of his hand makes me shrink in disgust."

"I will cut his throat," cried Harry furiously.

"No, no! Keep clear of him. You must recover that letter. That is what I demand of you. The detective you have engaged must have other resources. Let him try everything. He must not hesitate for expenses. Promise him fifty thousand—a hundred thousand dollars if it be necessary."

"You remind me of my main errand here to-day," replied Harry. "All hope is not at an end. There is a means by which the letter may be regained without cost or delay. We hold a power over Julius Martindale equal to his power over you. This power I propose to put into your hands."

"What is it?" she cried hopefully. "Tell me. I will do anything—anything."

"It is this," said Harry. "Some of the most valuable documents in the State Department records are missing. Those records are under the sole charge of Martindale. The party who

stole them has vanished. If their loss be discovered Martindale is ruined. He can not explain it, and cannot return them."

"Why?"

"Because they are in our hands, and we do not intend to give them up for any smaller price than that letter."

"Thank Heaven, then, there is some hope! You have not been idle. But how will you act? What do you propose to do?"

"The offer has been already made him to exchange these documents for the stolen letter."

"And what did he say? Did he agree?" she eagerly demanded, looking up with sparkling eyes.

"He refused."

"Then why have you raised false hopes in me?" she asked reproachfully.

"He had a reason for his refusal. He knew the thief, and hoped to catch him and recover his plunder. This hope is at an end. The thief has escaped. Another effort, rightly made, may be more successful."

"Yes, yes! Let it be made at once. I shall not rest an hour until I learn its result!"

"It is you who are to make it, Lucile," he replied, looking at her meaningfully. "I have these

documents in my possession. I propose to place them in your hands. When Martindale next calls on you, to renew his insolent demands, the power will be yours, not his. You can let him know that you possess these papers, and demand your letter in exchange."

"But if he refuses?"

"Threaten to place them in the hands of General Gordon, unless the letter is in your possession within three hours. Give him no longer time. If he has time to act he may devise some counter scheme. Let him see that you mean what you say."

"You are right," she responded. "Give me the documents. I will do so. You have done well, Harry. I feel as if we are safe at last from this terrible danger."

"I have them here," he replied, thrusting his hand into his pocket, and withdrawing a thick package. "Take them, and use them skillfully, Lucile. They are precious."

A slight shock at this moment showed that the boat had reached a stopping-place, and struck the landing wharf at Alexandria.

It threw Mrs. Gordon from her feet, but she was caught in the arms of her ready lover.

"Shall I not have that kiss now, Lucile? Have I not earned that guerdon?"

"Not as a lover, then. But as a faithful friend."

He pressed his lips to the rosy mouth that was held up to him. But the kiss was that of a lover, not of a friend, and the disguised lady withdrew blushing from his embrace.

"That is the first and the last," she said, in a voice that trembled despite its effort to be resolute. "This is a river episode, Harry Lindsay. When we touch land the dream is at an end."

Five minutes more found them on land with the stream of hurrying passengers.

No one would have recognized Mrs. Gordon, with her veiled face and plain attire. At her request Harry left her. His fashionable dress threw suspicion on her character.

The hope of a long rural walk with the woman he loved so warmly was brought to an end by her resolution to return at once, by train to Washington.

"What you desire might be very pleasant to you, but would be very dangerous to me," she said. "This masquerade must be ended as soon as possible. I shall cling to these documents as precious treasures. I can only hope for success."

Two hours afterwards found her in her

palatial home, the disguise discarded and her ordinary rich attire resumed. It had been an enterprise full of peril to one in her station. If she had been recognized, the most awkward consequences might have followed. She breathed freely again when within the silken boundaries of her boudoir.

"I am eager for my coming contest with Martindale," she declared. "I shall not be easy until that is well over."

Yet her enemy seemed in no haste to appear. Several days passed, during which he continued absent. Mrs. Gordon grew more and more nervous and excited as the time passed and her uncertainty continued. Her nervousness was likely to tell against her in a contest of wits with her shrewd foe.

It was three days after the era of the steam-boat ride when Martindale made his appearance in her private reception room.

Mrs. Gordon received him with a forced smile on her lips.

"I just met General Gordon going out," said the official, with assumed carelessness. "He told me I should find you here, ready for visitors."

"He was right," she answered quietly.

"Perhaps he would not have thought so if he had known the purpose of my visit."

"I doubt if that would have troubled General Gordon. He has confidence in me."

"We are alike in that respect," laughed Martindale. "I too have confidence. I am confident that you are prepared to give me the information promised."

"Not promised, sir."

"Demanded, then."

"The interview need not be protracted on that ground. I decline to give any such information."

Martindale looked at her in surprise, as she spoke these words in firm and decided accents. He leaned back in his chair, with a curling lip.

"As you will, Mrs. Secretary Gordon," he said. "You shall have three hours to change your mind. If not done by that time a certain letter, that you know well of, will be delivered into General Gordon's hands. I fancy you know my character. I seldom threaten. But my threats are never idle words."

She sat back in graceful dignity, her eyes fixed on him with an expression of mocking triumph which he could not understand.

"We are alike in that respect, Julius Martindale," she replied. "I, too, put my threats into execution. I, on my part, give you three hours to return that stolen letter to my possession,

If not done in that time, certain documents, that you know well of, shall be delivered into General Gordon's hands."

"Documents? What documents?" he cried hastily. "I do not understand you, Mrs. Gordon."

"Perhaps I can make my meaning clear. I refer to four important documents which were recently stolen from the record room of the Department of State. No one has access to these records except Julius Martindale. If the fact that any of them have been lost through his carelessness is made public, his career as a government official will cease. And it is quite possible that worse consequences may ensue."

Martindale seemed to have received a shock.

He gasped slightly, and there was a trouble in his eyes which he could not conceal.

"I do not understand to what you refer," he remarked, in a faltering accent.

"I am sorry for your lack of understanding," was the mocking reply. "I will say, further, that those documents are in my possession at this moment, and that unless the letter be returned within the specified time they shall, without failure or hesitation, be placed in General Gordon's hands."

Mrs. Gordon never looked more beauti-

ful than at that moment of triumph over her foe. There was a light in her eyes and a satiric smile on her lips that gave her face a new meaning.

Yet she failed to read the look of cunning that came into her antagonist's face.

He sprang to his feet as she ended, with an assumed excitement and incredulity.

"This is ridiculous, madame!" he cried. "You cannot impose on me by any such weak device. It is impossible that you should have any such documents. Impossible, I say, from the fact that no such documents have been lost. Whoever has put you up to this ridiculous scheme has been playing with you. Your arrow has fallen and missed its mark, Mrs. Gordon," he continued, with an incredulous smile. "I think we had better bring this interview to an end. You have my last word. Unless you give me the required information within three hours the letter goes to General Gordon."

He turned on his heel and walked with a steady step to the door, which he opened and passed through without hesitation.

His assurance had been so well assumed as to throw Mrs. Gordon into a quandary. It struck her that perhaps he really was not aware of the loss of the documents. She could convince him of this, at any rate,

Her nervousness and excitement told against her here. She was in no mood for calm thinking. In an instant she had sprung impulsively to her feet, and called him back.

"Stay! One moment, Mr. Martindale. You doubt my word. I will prove to you that I am not speaking at random. Here! You shall see the documents."

He turned back as she spoke, driving from his lip its cunning smile, and putting on an air of grave doubt.

The excited lady swept across the room to a cabinet, opened it with a key which she took from her pocket, and touched a spring within that revealed a secret drawer.

Within this lay a parcel of folded papers, which she drew out.

He stood resting on the back of a chair, in a listless attitude, with doubt strongly marked on his face.

"Very prettily played, Mrs. Gordon," he laughed provokingly. "I had no idea you were such a charming and skilful actress."

His satire increased her excitement. For the moment she had lost her usual judgment.

"You doubt me, then? See here! And here! Read the heading of that paper! Do you doubt me now?"

He bent forward, as if to read the head lines of the document which she had partly unfolded and held towards him."

In her nervous haste to convince him she did not dream of his actual intention.

In an instant, with the spring of a tiger, he was beside her. One hand caught her wrist in an iron grasp. The other wrenched the papers from her hold.

It had all passed with lightning speed. Ere she hardly knew what had occurred, Martindale stood opposite her, tightly clasping the valuable documents, his face full of triumphant malice.

"So Mrs. Gordon has been robbing the Department of State!" he cried. "Luckily I have recovered the stolen papers. I shall take care to restore them at once to the record room."

"Give them to me," she cried passionately, springing forward and striving to tear them from his grasp.

He held them beyond her reach.

"Proceed, my dear madame," he said mockingly. "This is the embrace I have so long desired from those beautiful arms."

She recoiled at his words.

"Return them," she exclaimed furiously, "or I will rouse the house and have them torn from your hands by the servants."

"Do so, madame. I should like an opportunity to tell them of Mrs. Gordon's steamboat ride in disguise, in company with her lover."

She stared at him with wide-open eyes. Then reeling, she turned and fell half fainting on the luxurious sofa behind her.

"All is lost" came in gurgling accents from her lips.

Martindale stood looking down on her as a fiend might look on his victim.

CHAPTER XV.

A LESSON FOR A DETECTIVE.

IT was an excited party that met in Harry Lindsay's apartments several days after the occurrences just narrated.

There were four persons present, Lindsay himself, Frank Sharp the detective, and Will Benton, while Mrs. Gordon formed the fourth member of the party.

She had come, as before, heavily veiled, and wrapped in a disguising cloak, which she had thrown aside, revealing her rich attire beneath.

The excitement however, did not extend to one member of the party. Will Benton was perfectly cool, despite the intense conversation which had been going on about him. He occupied a reclining window seat, where he quietly smoked a cigarette, indolently listening.

"I can blame no one but myself!" cried Mrs. Gordon, in a distracted manner. "I suffered him, in a moment of insane excitement, to

cheat me by his base duplicity. I have lost the hold which you gave me over him, and deserve to suffer for my folly."

"The base hound!" exclaimed Harry starting up in a fury. "By Heaven, he shall not profit by his villainy! I will kill him! I will shoot him as I would a dog!"

"No, no! I cannot listen to such madness. I am at his mercy and must remain so, unless some other means can be found for recovering that fatal letter."

"Tell me," she continued, turning pleadingly to the detective. "Have you done all that can be done? Have you exhausted every method? Is there no hope? I will make you rich if you return me that letter."

"I should be glad to do so without pay, rejoined the detective earnestly. "Of course there is always hope. Yet our search has been most thorough. Not only Martindale's house, but his room and desk in the Department Offices have been thoroughly examined. He is not the man to trust in any one, yet we have searched the houses of his intimate friends. Every place where there seems any chance that he has hidden it has been examined, and all in vain."

"Then all is at an end! I am indeed lost!"

She sank back on a sofa, too overcome with despair to remain standing.

Lindsay and the detective gazed on her in a sort of distraction, as if not knowing what to do or to say.

Yet Will Benton continued to smoke as calmly as before. One would have sworn he was a man without a heart.

"You are alive and in health, Mrs. Gordon," he quietly remarked. It is impossible that all can be lost to a person alive and in health."

She turned hastily to him.

"What can I do?" she cried. "Tell me what I can do?"

"Martindale asks you to reveal to him government secrets?" asked Will, taking the cigarette from his lips, and sending the smoke gracefully upwards.

"Yes, yes! And I dare not refuse!"

"It is his purpose to use these secrets on the stock board, or to so handle them as to advance him to a higher position?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Very well. My advice is that you give him false information. He hopes to make himself rich and great by your aid. Give him such information that if he attempts to use it he will be ruined."

They all looked at him in surprise, as he quietly offered this seemingly useless advice.

"Ruin him? It would ruin me! He would take extreme measures in his fury."

"What could he do?"

"He could hand that letter to my husband. That would suffice to destroy me."

"I fancy not," said Will, returning the cigarette to his lips.

"Why? What do you mean? You speak in riddles," she gasped.

"You are talking confounded nonsense, Will Benton," cried Harry, angrily.

The detective said nothing. But his eyes were fixed on the speaker as if he felt that there was more behind all this than appeared on the surface.

Will fell back into an easier attitude than ever. He sent up a puff of smoke which he quietly watched as it curled in wreaths towards the ceiling.

"How much did you say you would give for that letter?" he lazily asked.

"Any sum you demand. Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars if no less will do."

"The half of it will satisfy my utmost aspirations," rejoined Will, with provoking carelessness.

Lindsay, angered beyond endurance, caught him by the shoulder and shook him soundly.

"What are you up to?" he cried. "By Jove, I am half inclined to fling you out of the window."

"I don't believe you have the muscle, Harry," answered Will, in the same indolent tone.

"What does all this mean?" demanded the detective, now first speaking. "Have you learned anything? Are you on the track of that letter? Can you give me a hint as to where and how to find it?"

"Quite likely I might give you a point," rejoined Will.

Mrs. Gordon sprang up, and hastened eagerly across the room, her eyes sparkling with hope and excitement.

"Oh Mr. Benton, if you can do anything I shall bless you forever. You do not know how terribly I have suffered from this dreadful uncertainty."

"I don't profess to be a detective," answered Will. "But I might be able to give this gentleman a hint or two in his business. That he has made an energetic search for the letter I am satisfied. But not much is to be found by hunting on the wrong track."

The detective frowned at this rebuke.

"On the wrong track!" he cried. "Are you ready then to put me on the right one? I don't profess to be proof against mistakes."

"Sit down," said Will. "We can talk better sitting than standing."

He threw away his cigarette, and straightened himself in his chair, as the others drew up seats, and gathered eagerly around him.

"I mean what I have said," began Will, looking at the detective. "You have made a mistake, and that mistake has made all your work useless."

"It may be possible. It would not be my first one."

"Shall I tell you in what that mistake consists?"

"Certainly."

"There are stock ways of doing all things. Even detectives have their stock methods. But average plans are only suited to average people. You can't fit a square plug in a round hole. When dealing with a man out of the average the method should be suited to the man."

"Then my mistake is in not studying the character of Julius Martindale?"

"That is what I mean. It was not wise to suppose a man of his shrewd cunning would act like any ordinary man. He knew exactly

what the police would do, and knew just how to cheat them."

Mr. Sharp opened his eyes, but said nothing. He was beginning to perceive that the speaker was not quite a fool.

"Do you fancy that what you have done has been unknown to him?" continued Will. "When he was robbed by footpads in the street he knew very well who those footpads were, and what they wanted. His trip to Canada was not made only to overtake his nephew. It was to give you a free field for your search."

"Do you know this?"

"I do. I have not been idle. I know that he has had agents to observe every movement of the police."

"Then what has he done with the letter?" broke in Mrs. Gordon. "Has he sent it out of the city?"

"No. It was necessary that he should keep it within reach."

"Has he destroyed it?" asked Harry.

"That would put it still further out of reach."

"Then where is it?" demanded the detective.

"There are more ways than one of hiding a letter," rejoined Will quietly. "Sometimes a thing is best hidden when it is most in sight."

"Ah! Is that your idea?"

"When every possible and impossible hiding place is likely to be searched, a wise man will not try to hide his treasures. That letter would have been safer thrown loosely on a table among other papers than hidden in the securest corner of Martindale's house. A heap of loose, exposed papers is the last place you would think of searching."

"Not exactly," replied the detective, with a confident smile. "I fancy there were no probable or improbable places in Martindale's house that escaped scrutiny. I hardly think I could be taken in by any such transparent artifice."

"Then I have misjudged you," rejoined Will, as he coolly drew another cigarette from his pocket.

Mrs. Gordon, who had been leaning forward with clasped hands and open lips, full of hope and eagerness, fell back at these words, with a return of despair.

It looked as if Will had been playing with them.

"Do you object to cigarette smoke, Mrs. Gordon?" he asked. "I have the bad fashion that I cannot talk business without smoke,"

"It looks as if your business was all smoke," cried Harry angrily.

"Can I ask you to help me to a light, my boy? Here, you can use this bit of paper."

He drew from his pocket a piece of soiled writing paper, twisted up into the form of a cigar lighter.

This he handed to Harry, who took it grumbly. He was in no sweet temper, and only that he had to be polite in his own house, he would have felt decidedly like kicking Will Benton down stairs.

"If you have nothing better to tell us you might finish your smoking in the street, and not before a lady," grumbled Harry, as he rose reluctantly.

"Perhaps you are right," replied Will, with unshaken indifference. "And, by the way, I may be burning something of importance. Can I trouble you to open that paper and look at it before you set it on fire?"

Harry did so in an angry fashion. He felt that he was being made a fool of by his nonchalant friend.

Yet, if he had been suddenly turned into stone by the eyes of a basilisk, he could not have fallen into a more rigid attitude than when his eyes fell upon that unfolded sheet.

With open mouth and staring eyes, and a face suffused with blood, he stood glaring upon it as if he would never move again.

Mrs. Gordon and the detective sprang up in alarm. Will sat unmoved, with a smile of amusement on his lips.

"This!" cried Harry, suddenly breaking from his rigid state. "This! where? what? Good heavens, how did you?"

Words failed him, and he sprang forward and glared eagerly into his friend's smiling face, while he pointed with trembling finger, to the unfolded sheet.

"What can it be?" exclaimed Mrs. Gordon, springing forward and snatching the paper from his quivering hand.

The instant her eyes fell on it she grew deathly pale, and tottered back. The arm of the detective was quickly advanced to save her from falling.

"What means this scene? Is that the stolen letter?" he demanded, in a tone of excitement unusual to him.

"Yes! By some extraordinary means it has been recovered! How, I cannot imagine! But you have saved me, Mr. Benton. I owe you my eternal gratitude."

The overjoyed and impulsive woman sprang

forward and seized both Will's hands in hers pressing them to her heart in a fervor of emotion.

"Your gratitude, and one hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars, Mrs. Gordon," he placidly remarked.

"But how—where—in what strange way did you get it?" demanded Harry.

"Do you recognize the handwriting?"

"Yes. It is my letter! It is that letter I was idiot enough to write and send." Mrs. Gordon's eyes turned to the speaker with a look that filled the impulsive fellow with happiness.

"Well, then, you don't object to bring me a light for my cigarette? and to use that piece of paper for the purpose?"

Catching the idea Harry instantly sprang to obey. In a minute he brought the dangerous letter, rolled up and blazing, and passed it to his friend with a trembling hand.

Will coolly lighted his cigarette, and then continued to hold the paper while the flame quickly crept up its folds. Only when a mere pinch remained between his fingers did he drop it on the hearth, where it continued to burn.

"You are free now, Mrs. Gordon," he said.

"Your enemy has played and lost. The winning cards are in your hand."

"Can I ever thank you enough?" cried the happy and delighted woman, her eyes beaming with liquid light. "As for this gentleman," turning to the detective, "the fee offered him for his services shall be paid. He has well earned it."

"I am responsible for that," remarked Harry. "The offer was mine."

"Will Mr. Benton finish his story?" asked the detective. "He has a lesson in my business for me which may be as much value to me as the money promised."

"Your failure was my success," replied Will. "I only took up the work where you left off. I knew what you had done, and set my wits to work to see if I could not improve upon it; of course, I did not imagine that you would let any loose papers escape you. But there was the chance of a studied carelessness that would deceive even you. On that chance I worked."

"And succeeded?"

"Well, you have the results. They were obtained in the following manner: First, learning that you had not made full use of young Morton in obtaining possible clues, I secured a

photograph of him, and followed up his track to Detroit, where, you remember, he slipped through Martindale's fingers. From certain clues gathered here, and my knowledge of the man—”

“Then you were acquainted with him?” exclaimed the detective.

“Casually only. I had met him possibly half a dozen times, in the club rooms, at the Georgetown races, and once or twice at receptions. Besides, I used to run across him now and then in the corridors of the Treasury building, where I am employed.

“Well, as I was saying, I once heard him speak of the chances a young man might have in Chicago; and as the game was worth the candle, I went on to that city, in the hope of running him down. You remember, I was gone about two weeks?”—turning to Harry.

“Yes, I do; and I remember I thought you most infernally cool, leaving a friend in such a fix as I was, to go off hunting, as you led me to think you were doing.”

Benton laughed easily. “Well, that’s neither here nor there. I had a little scheme of my own, and if it worked, well and good, if not, no one except myself should feel the worse for my failure.”

“Dear old boy!” Lindsay began—

"Stow that, old man!" cried Will, "and let me spin my yarn."

"I went to Chicago; and inside of ten hours after landing, by the help of one of Allan Pinkerton's finest, and the photo I had cribbed from Martindale's album, I ran my fox to earth."

"And you got him to squeal!" exclaimed the detective, with the air of one who has read a disgustingly simple riddle.

"Not I!" Will replied, taking a few desultory puffs at his cigarette. "He was mightily frightened, and would have revealed anything to be let alone, but he knew nothing of the letter, and I returned as wise as I went, and as empty handed. There wasn't a smell of game in that forest," with a quiet smile.

"Well, well," exclaimed Lindsay, disgusted with the length and purposelessness of the recital, "come to the point, can't you! How *did* you stumble on to the letter?"

"Patience, patience, my little man; who's telling this story anyway?" he asked coolly. "And I may remark, in passing, that my stumble as you are pleased to call it, was a confoundedly lucky one for your serenely impatient highness!"

"On my return, I found a second excuse to go with a message to Martindale's house, at a

time when I knew him to be absent. I awaited his return, and used my eyes there freely, but in vain. The indications I looked for did not exist. I next visited him in his office, on a plea of official business. While he was writing the paper I needed, I was using my eyes. One thing attracted me. There was a shelf in front of his desk, covered with folded papers, that had on them a year's dust."

"I studied those papers," said the detective. "They had evidently not been recently disturbed."

"Just in front of them was a vase, containing a half-dozen twisted cigar lighters, some of them partly burned, as if they had been already used."

The detective opened his eyes.

"I may make a long story short," continued the speaker. "I fixed my affections on that vase at sight. It was the most careless and obtrusive object in house or office, and that was what I had been seeking. I took occasion to return in Mr. Martindale's absence. One minute sufficed me to seize and untwist the cigar lighters in the vase. The second I took hold of was the brownest and most begrimed of them all. A single glance was enough. I had the stolen letter."

"By Jove, that vase was the only thing I passed by," exclaimed the intensely interested detective, with a look of deep chagrin. "You have beaten me at my own business. What next, Mr. Benton? That is not all?"

"No. I had something else in view. I had taken care to prepare a closely similar lighter, which I placed in the vase. When I left it there was no sign that it had been disturbed."

"I cannot see what was to be gained by this," remarked Mrs. Gordon in surprise. "What need we care how soon he discovers his loss?"

"Because he sought to make you his victim. *You must make him yours!* He will return to you for the government secrets demanded. Give them to him, and let him ruin himself in using them."

"Ah! I begin to perceive your meaning. That was what you meant when you advised me to give him false information? You wish to lure him to destruction?"

"You have my idea precisely. Take your seats, gentlemen. I fancy that we are shrewd enough to dig a pitfall that it will ruin Martin-dale to fall into. He deserves it, and we should deal with him without pity."

An hour of earnest conference succeeded. When Mrs. Gordon left she had her plan of action fully in hand.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE FOX IN THE TRAP.

ON the day succeeding the important interview described in the last chapter Julius Martindale left General Gordon's house, at a late hour in the afternoon with a face full of hope and triumph.

Mrs. Gordon, with much seeming reluctance, and as if every word had been drawn from her by sheer force, had put him in possession of the government secrets demanded.

"This is but the beginning," he muttered to himself triumphantly. "I shall risk all my fortune in the stocks on this information. I am sure to win. And the position I have been working for in the Treasury Department is mine. They dare not refuse me."

Yet, I hope, my fine Madame Secretary Gordon does not fancy this will silence me. There is no secret of the government which General Gordon does not know. All these secrets

shall be mine. If I play my cards well I am safe for any position I may fancy, and millions of wealth.

"And that is not all. I am bound to win that proud lady for my own. She dare not refuse any favor I may dare to ask. She is my slave, body and soul, while I hold the secret of the letter over her head."

He went to his office, swelling with pride. Plans for the morrow's operations were to be laid. He was so sure of victory that not a moment's hesitation checked his movements.

The next day certain prominent brokers were much surprised by the magnitude of purchases made in a certain stock by the agent of a person unknown to them.

Through the hands of two or three of these operators five hundred thousand dollars were put up on margin.

Julius Martindale had dared in one great venture the fortune which he had scraped together by years of trickery and double dealing.

He had no doubts of the result. The secret information he possessed could not fail to send that stock up with a boom. The advance he hoped for was bound to make him the owner of five million dollars.

Yet the next day and for several succeeding

days, the stock moved downwards. The shrewd operator smiled, and scraped up money to protect his margins. The plans of the government would be made public in a day or two more, and the turn in prices which was to make him rich could not long be delayed.

At the same time he was manipulating his secret knowledge to win the coveted place in the Treasury Department.

Two days more passed. Then there came demands through his agent for more funds to protect his margins. The stock had suffered a sudden and sharp decline.

In astonishment Martindale hurried up town. It was the day the government policy was to be made public. What did this mean? He read a private despatch that lay on his desk in the office.

And then he fell to the floor as if he had been shot.

The government policy had been announced, and it was the very opposite of that of which he had been informed. Stocks were sure to go down with a rush, and particularly the one in which he had bought so largely.

He was a ruined man!

Before two hours word came to him that his advances had been absorbed to cover his

contracts. Every cent he owned in the world was swept away.

And before the day was over a letter from the higher authorities reached his hands, dismissing him from his official position, on the charge of his falsely pretending to possess government secrets.

The man was crushed. For an hour he sat as if dazed, without a motion of hand or foot.

Then he sprang to his feet in a torrent of rage.

"If there is nothing else there is revenge!" he hissed with tigerish fury. "She has deceived me to my ruin. By Heaven she shall be bitterly repaid for her perfidy!"

He seized with an eager hand the seeming cigar-lighter from the vase before him, and thrust it into his pocket with spiteful haste.

"We shall see who wins, madame," he furiously exclaimed as he hastened away.

An hour afterwards found him in Mrs. Gordon's boudoir. He was threatening her in a bitter concentration of rage. Yet she sat in dignified calm, with a smile of disdain on her beautiful features.

"I must say I do not understand you, Mr. Martindale. Secrets? What secrets? You talk in riddles, sir."

"We shall see, madame. By all that's good,

I'll bend your proud spirit to the earth! Do you hear me, Mrs. Gordon? Before the hour is over there shall be that in the hands of your husband that will bring you to utter shame before the world. I swear it, and I will perform it!

"Do your worst, villain! I do not know what base scheme you have in view, but I defy you with the scorn of virtue and innocence."

"You do right, Mrs. Gordon!" spoke a stern voice behind them. "And this man shall answer to me for the threats which he has dared to utter."

They both turned in surprise. During the altercation General Gordon had entered unseen and unheard.

For a moment Martindale was taken aback. Then he recovered his assurance with a return of his rage.

"Perhaps you may change your mind, General Gordon," he said, with bitter satire. "I am sorry to be obliged to tell you that you are deceived in this *virtuous* wife of yours. You may not be aware that she has a lover, with whom she holds correspondence unknown to you. I feel it my duty as a friend to tell you this." General Gordon's brow grew black as a thundercloud. He turned to his wife with the

look of an Othello. But she bore his glare of jealous doubt with a face of unmoved serenity.

"Ask this *gentleman* to prove his words," she said. General Gordon turned fiercely to Martindale.

"Do you hear?" he cried. "Prove what you have said! If you have lied to me I will tear you limb from limb! I swear it, by all the gods!"

"Here is the proof!" cried Martindale, snatching the rolled up sheet from his pocket and hastily unfolding it. "Read what is written here, and you will not say again that Julius Martindale is a liar, a fool or a villain."

General Gordon snatched the sheet from his hand, that trembled with suppressed passion.

He ran his eye hastily over its contents, and then looked up at the man before him as one might gaze on an idiot.

For a moment this gaze continued, while Martindale grew red as blood in the face.

Then General Gordon broke out into a laugh of bitter scorn.

"I do not agree with you," he said. "If I believe this letter I must declare that Julius Martindale *is* a *liar*, a *fool* and a *villain*, for I find nothing else written here."

"You lie, by heaven!" cried Martindale,

insane with rage, as he snatched the letter madly from General Gordon's hand.

He ran his eye hastily over it, and then dropped it with a yell of dismay.

"Baffled!" he cried. "Fooled! cheated! Let me go! I am sick!"

He staggered and groped blindly as he made his way towards the door.

But before he had reached it General Gordon's hand was on his shoulder, with an iron grip.

"Not so fast," he hissed out. "You have insulted and threatened my wife, and given me the lie. There is but one answer to such insults. You shall fight me, if you have the spirit of a man."

Martindale was no coward, and he faced the incensed old soldier with some return of spirit.

"As you will, sir. And when and where you will. I am ready."

With these words he left the room, in haste to remove himself from the eyes of those before whom he had played such an ignoble part.

"I will kill him!" he hissed. "And I will yet disgrace her! They shall find the kind of man they have to deal with. I have not yet played my last card."

He was as good as his word in one particular,

Late in the next afternoon the two enemies, with their seconds, met in a secluded spot near the banks of the Potomac.

Pistol shots were exchanged with unusually fatal results.

The villain's threat to kill General Gordon was achieved. The officer fell dead, with a bullet through his heart.

But Martindale fared no better. He fell mortally wounded, and died from loss of blood before he could be removed from the ground.

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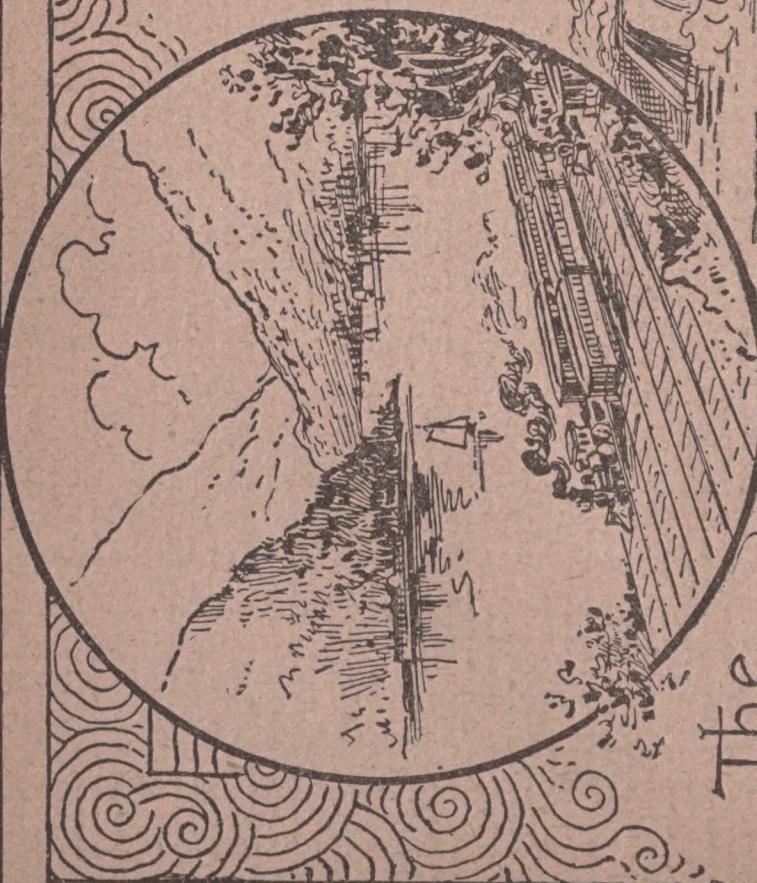
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